

COME HOME

STELLA C. S. PERRY



Class P73

Book P4934

Copyright N^o Co

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

COME HOME



FLAME LA GRANDE

COME HOME

A ROMANCE OF THE LOUISIANA
RICE-LANDS

BY

STELLA G. S. PERRY

Author of "Palmetto," "The Kind Adventure," etc.



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
MCMXXIII

P23
P433A
Co

Copyright, 1923, by
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

All rights reserved



Printed in the United States of America

SEP 22 '23

© C1A759079

no 1

To
MY SON
RALPH R. PERRY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE GIRL WHO COULD NOT FEEL . . .	1
II.	CAMILLE BERENICIA COMES HOME . . .	16
III.	WEARY WINGS	30
IV.	THE ROAD TO THE WOODS	45
V.	AT THE MARGE	63
VI.	BERNE MAKES A FRIEND	71
VII.	PETER GOES HUNTING	85
VIII.	MARCEL NARCISSE AND HIS SHADOW . .	100
IX.	NESTS	112
X.	ELODI AND LANDRY	125
XI.	WHO CAN, MUST	135
XII.	DANIEL IS ENLISTED	152
XIII.	JUD BURDEN TELLS THE WORLD . . .	162
XIV.	THE CROWN OF CYPRESS	186
XV.	LANDRY TAKES NO BLAME	206
XVI.	BLACK WINGS OF WARNING	223
XVII.	RED DAWN	243
XVIII.	HOPE AGAINST HOPE	269
XIX.	CLOSING IN	289
XX.	POOL O' THE MOON	300
XXI.	THE MAN WHO HAD EVERYTHING . .	311
XXII.	WAITING	325
XXIII.	RICE	347
XXIV.	TREASURE TROVE	359

COME HOME

COME HOME

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL WHO COULD NOT FEEL

AS the slow train, going into the Acadian parishes, southwestward from New Orleans, stopped at the junction—the sixth stop in that last half-hour—Daniel thumped his knee irritably.

He could not bear the slowness, the frequent stoppings, the whole blamed pokiness of this road, of this place.

Intolerable! The doctor was dead wrong, to send a man in his condition down here to this dullness.

He was going to be bored; what was worse, he was sure to bore his grandfather, too.

They had no imagination, or they'd never have sent a sick man to disappoint the good old chap, who had probably been wanting a scion he could show off to his neighbors.

Daniel had imagination himself; it was not making things easier for him now.

The thing he dreaded most was that famous

Louisiana hospitality. Old neighbors who could remember his childhood among them, remember it more clearly than he did, and would want to remind him of its pleasant inanities, and perhaps hold celebrations about him; when all *he* wanted was to be let alone, to “play dead” until—if so be—he could come alive again!

He had been glad to get away from all the kindness tendered him in New Orleans. Down here, in “the parishes,” it would be worse; here, where everybody had known his family since the days of Evangeline. Evangeline? Since d’Iberville! It was going to be—Lord!

Of course, the doctor had expressed theories and had to live up to them,—all that hokum about the restorative qualities of a childhood environment; what good could the fact that he’d lived here as a cub do now?—but how on earth had they ever got his mother’s consent, her cooperation? Poor little girl! How they must have scared her!

Daniel smiled with tender amusement as he thought of his mother.

Oh! Louisiana did have a certain call to him; normally he’d have liked visiting the family seat. He’d have liked to find out how much of this place he did remember.

That sugar-house awhile back,—wasn’t that where he and Camille La Grande had been punished for eating *cuite* syrup, against adult orders, when they’d been taken there to see the grinding? That

funny little kid! She went and confessed before anybody made inquiries about it; Daniel recalled the shock of that. Nervy, though. There was something sporting about that little gipsy. Was she here now? Married, probably.

' For the love of Pete, what was that train waiting for *now*?

"Hold up! Steady there, boy!" He checked himself, brought his nervousness up short with a laugh, set his teeth upon it. "What's your hurry, son? We're not *going* anywhere."

A breath of honeysuckle floated in the window. The world on that side of the train was a tangle of honeysuckle; fences, old trees,—the fragrant ground-vines reaching up ambitious for the gray moss that hung above their heads,—fallen logs, negro cabins, the very fields a carpet of white and green and yellow.

Through the opposite window he saw reedy marshes, punctuated by light jade trees and divided by lagoons and winding waters. Islands of water-hyacinths, not yet in bloom but vividly green, floated upon them. On the marge, giant irises,—purple, lilac, tawny,—were coming into flower.

The sky was plumbago blue; the reflections in the waters perfect.

A mocking-bird sang.

"Oh! it's pretty enough," Dan said grudgingly, as if resisting an inner voice. "But what on—oh, well! It's orders."

He stared moodily at the floating islands of hyacinth; likened himself to them. They looked like real earth-islands; he looked like a strong man. If you stepped on them you went through to the muddy water. As for him, no resistance either. Fake. Hollow. Floating.

He had expected too much of the War; life had given him something worth while to do at last and he had believed that he had found himself in it, never again to relax into the vapidities that tangled his personality and clung to him, like the gray moss that fellow out there was trying to unwind from the wheels of his buggy.

Even when they gave him the War Cross, his thought had been, "God! Let this *last!* Keep me in earnest!"

He had been deceived. He came back used up. Couldn't even play any more. A beastly pain in his side, a weariness that was too restless to rest, a sense of futility as if it had all been just a grand gesture; a Cross of War and a double cross of peace,—that was what he had given himself. Why, he was worse than before he had enlisted! Then, green wood that wouldn't burn. Now, embers.

Once more he pulled himself together.

"At it again! I *must* let go. . . . I *beg* your pardon, Madam!"

The train had come to life with a jerk, and a

large black-silked lady who had just walked down the isle was precipitated into Daniel's lap.

He helped her to her feet.

She smelled of *vetivert* sachet and he liked the scent.

He liked the general effect of the stout lady, her lack of embarrassment, the pure amusement in her laugh, the tinkling jet beadwork on her chest and back, even the long earrings, green jade on black onyx, that dangled to her shoulders.

Her eyes were like black onyx, too; and her hair, in old-fashioned water-waves on her broad white forehead, was nearly as shiny as the jet-trimmed bonnet above it. There were deep dimples in her soft white cheeks; they were both showing now, as she smiled. Little pits of rice powder, they seemed, but nevertheless altogether friendly and agreeable. Her hands were dimpled, too; she steadied herself with them as she took the seat next the window that Dan relinquished in her favor.

"Thank you!—I beg *your* pardon of *you*, sir!—But, after all, it is the train should apologize: is it no? This train, he is so slow; and now to jomp, so of a sudden! I think some one must have frighten' him; *hein?*" She chuckled at her own conceit. "Ah! Now we start. We pass more quickly now. I very near miss' the train, me. You see me run? You didn't see me run? Oh!"—regretfully—"you didn't see me run! My chauff-

feur he was late and so I was also late; and he help' me run for the train. I regret you didn't see us run. We were fonny. My chauffeur has a wooden leg, *vous savez?* And me, I am not construct' for to run; eh?"

She laughed a soft alto, to an accompaniment of tinkling beads.

Daniel enjoyed her. Without realizing it, the sick boy had been needing something, some one, warm and folksy. They soon accompanied each other, like old acquaintances.

In part, he explained himself to her. He was from New York. Rather knocked out. The doctor had prescribed Louisiana.

"Tss! Tss! *C'est la guerre!* I know. That war! Well, you will like here. Good food, good people, good beauty to see, ride, hunt, fish,—plenty. Much better than New York, I thank God."

"You know New York?"

"My sister, she live' there. In a barracks. Apartment house, they call it. Me, a *barracks*. On Park Avenue and Forty-Seven' Street. 'Orrible!"

"You find it horrible,—Park Avenue and Forty-Seventh?" Dan asked, smiling.

"For me, yes. In New York they have no po'ches."

He did not understand.

"Po'ches, verandas, galleries,—you know, po'ches!"

"Certainly; porches *are* scarce there."

"So! No po'ches. No rocking chairs. No gardens. And me,—oh-ee!—I think: no po'ches, no hospitality. No rocking chairs, no comfort. No gardens, no homes. Not so? You think?"

Dan smiled, shrugged. "I'm used to it, you see."

His animation had waned; he could not keep interested in anything for long.

He looked out of the window, taking no pleasure in the dark mystery of the lush woods going by.

His fellow-traveller understood, sighed, wrapped the young man in a motherly silence.

Hélas! The invisible scars of war! In that country they knew them of old and still remembered, the women. It was all she could do not to pat the brown head drooping beside her.

A voice roused, lifted, rejuvenated it.

"Good morning, Mme. Boutin," was all it said, as the girl passed by and sat down a little ahead of them, across the aisle.

"Good morning, Berne," Mme. Boutin replied.

There was something so young, so strong, so steady, so singing in the girl's voice that Dan had risen to it as to the call of a bugle.

The girl was of fair height, slender but not frail,—*fausse maigre*,—very straight yet not ungraceful; there was a lone cypress on the skyline that stood and moved as she did.

Her face and throat were too thin for beauty;

the cheek-bones and the little bones of the shoulders showed like the soft padded ribs of a colt. She held her eyes well open, large, steady, observant. They were clear, dark, ruddy-golden brown like old amber, and heavily fringed with red-brown lashes dipped into black at the edges. Her eyebrows were silky and sweeping off to points, like the outstretched wings of a bird.

Indeed, her whole expression was at once alert and soaring.

Her skin was very white and, like many red-haired women, she had a cluster of freckles across the bridge of her small, straight nose. Its nostrils and her eyelids were delicately finished, sculpture-smooth.

Her mouth, though tenderly turned, had a certain rigidity and so had her rounded chin. Once, a stranger had said that Berne's mouth looked as if her lower lip were pressed to keep from trembling; but a neighbor had laughed in contradiction.

"You imagine, my friend! No, *cher*, no! She is not emotional, that girl!"

She wore her burnished hair, a streaked amalgam of gold and copper, drawn back too severely for her slender face; its mass at the nape of her neck seemed to pull it away from her forehead. But that forehead was, after all, her chief beauty; not too high, broad, smooth and white, her only classic feature. The hair waved a very little, in long waves; a tendril had fallen to her cheek.

She held her head as a boy holds his, half timid, half defiant.

Berne wore a gray linen skirt and a gray blouse made like a Boy Scout's. The jacket of her suit hung over her arm. A wide white sailor hat was in her hand.

"An interesting girl," said Daniel. Though he did not dare, his manner asked, "Who is she?"

Mme. Boutin puckered her brow, raised her plump hand in apology, answered his implied question.

"You will forgive. But we,—it is an old-fashion' custom,—cannot give our young ladies' names to the strangers. To even such very nice strangers like you."

"Of course, you can't. And I didn't ask you to, either; did I?" he laughed.

He sat back and regarded the girl. Her profile, white and fine against the brilliant blue of the sky, looked like a della Robbia relief.

Mme. Boutin would have been astonished to learn that his interest had begun before this encounter.

Dan had noticed that girl at the theater in New Orleans, first because of her hair; then he had been amused because she had not smiled throughout the acceptable comedy; he could see her well from his box.

He had commented upon her immobility and Raoul Cantrelle, his host, had shrugged and said, "She is cold, that child. And, perhaps, stupid."

After that, Cantrelle could not give her name, of course, and Dan had not cared about it anyway. Not then.

But that girl, seen at closer range, did not look stupid. She had personality. He found that he wanted to know who she was.

It was a good sign in him, to have a real interest in anything. In his morbidly introspective state, he recognized that. He would indulge the impulse, rouse himself, take a little effort.

"Perhaps I may not be a stranger here, after all, dear Madam. Maybe you have mistaken a native for a stranger," he said.

"*Comment?*"

"I haven't been here since I was a boy. But, you know a family hereabout,—all over the landscape, I believe,—named Bardé?"

"Bardé But, yes! Who does not? I am married very close to them."

"Odillon Bardé is my grandfather."

"*Dieu de dieu!*" She clasped her hands, much excited. "You are the son of Olivier Bardé! You are small Daniel Bardé!"

"Yes, Madam. Most people, North, called us Barde, though, and my father dropped the accent after—"

"After he and your *grandpère* quarreled. I know! But do not *you* do so, here, my young friend. It is not my business but nevertheless my counsel. Keep that *ancien* accent. Best remain

Daniel Bardé in your own country, my son. Oo—ee! *Gai-Da*,—that is what we called you, because you were so gay, so laughing always. You don't remember? *Yes!* You remember!—I have hold you on my lap, *cher*, many times.”

She stopped, remembering how she had held him on her lap the day his mother deserted him.

He did not know about that, it was evident.

“Too bad I've forgotten that distinction,” he was saying with a smile. “But doubtless my mother will—”

“Without doubt,” she inserted drily. And Maude Bardé would doubtless remember, too, she thought, how she had scolded her,—the frivolous little new-rich from Chicago,—for not being content with Olivier and the baby and the rice-plantation, for exposing to gossip an unblemished name. Poor little fool! *Tiens!* Maybe not such a fool after all. For had they not followed her, done as she wished, Olivier and the child? Had not Olivier hurt his good father to the heart for her? Oo-ee! They get their way in the world, these selfish women; they are the ones who get all. *Ts! Ts!* This boy probably adored his mother as that poor Olivier had adored his wife.

“And now may I know who the young lady is?”

She laughed. “She interest' you?”

He told her about the theater; how the girl had not smiled at the play; how her aloofness had amused him.

"Hm. It is in character. To be sure, she has not much emotion, that child. She is austere, that girl. Like a statue. A very fine girl,—oh, yes! But she is not young and impulsive,—like me, who talk to strange young men on the trains." The beads jingled.

"Who is she?" he begged. He was actually impatient.

God! It was good to care! He really wanted to know. It mattered to him, something mattered at last; not very much, indeed,—but a break had come into his apathy, a rift in the cloud that oppressed him.

Perhaps this wise woman sensed that. At any rate, she provoked his interest, introduced suspense.

"Some call her Berne of the Birds. Some call her Berne of the Byah."

"Berne of Bayou or Birds,—very pretty. But what's her *name*? Look here, *madame*, are you teasing me?"

"Who knows? I have hold you on my knee, my friend. Not so? Oh, well! You shall be relieve'. This is Miss Camille Berenicia Marie La Grande."

"Camille—*what*? Camille La Grande,—Fiammetta La Grande,—*Flame*! Little Flame grown up! That *baby*!"

"You remember, eh? Her, you remember; not me, eh? Me, on whose lap you two slap each other and cry!—But, see here, honey, *mon fils*! Do not

call her *Flame*, *Fiammetta*, to-day. She don't like those names any more. Berenicia, she like'. I warn you. *Miss Berenicia. Berne.*"

"Right-o! I'll try not to offend. Camille La Grande! Anyway, from what you tell me, *Flame* doesn't suit this frigid young person. No wonder she doesn't like it."

"*Non.* You have right. It is amazing how she have no enthusiasm, that young creature. All for business, management, all control! Only for the birds!"

"Birds?"

"*Si.* She adores tham. Fonny, that girl."

Dan half-rose, quickly. "Will you pardon me?" he said. He must use this wonderful thing, this lively interest, before it left him, as it was sure soon to do.

"You go speak with Berenicia? You think she will have remember' so long?" doubtingly, with a deterring hand.

"Scarcely. But she must have heard about me. If she doesn't recall, I'll summon you to the rescue. If you please!"

"Ohh! Too bad! I regret. Here is my place. I must leave. You must surely, surely come stay a long time at our house,—*Gai-Da!* Pass me your word."

"Thank you! If I can."

"Ah, *bon!* Now, I will kiss you,—so! I have wanted to do this for ten miles, my son,—so, on

the curls, *hein?* And the good saints send you back your health, son of Olivier Bardé!"

She left him, dimpling at him, waved a chubby hand. But, once outside, she murmured to herself, "Maude Bardé! She has now this beautiful son of Olivier. She, who ran away and left him in his childhood! My poor Olivier,—who would be so, so proud of this son!—he is dead. Me, I am childless. They have strange blessings, these selfish women. Even life himself they can cajole."

Daniel made ready to address Miss La Grande. It was a risky thing to do; suppose she had forgotten, had never heard of him! Oh! Everybody hereabouts had heard of everybody else. It would be all right, or Mme. Boutin would have forbidden it.

Come what might, it was worth a *rébuff*, this doing something on his own initiative, this wanting to do it.

Emotionless. Rather alluring to meet that kind of a girl just now; the War and his decorations and illness had made all his own world of women so sloppy. Couldn't feel; eh? That was funny, too; Flame had had the temper of a small fiend as a child.

He walked beyond the girl's seat, turned back, facing her.

There was no one sitting beside her. He would sit there himself and then begin inconspicuously,

make it easier for her to ignore him if she wanted to.

She wouldn't, though; somehow, he knew she wouldn't.

But Daniel did not carry out this program. He did not even sit beside Camille Berenicia Marie.

He stopped a moment, regarded her, then slowly went back to his former place.

For, as he came toward this girl, who, he had twice been told, so lacked emotion, he saw that her hands were clenched, pressing hard on the brim of the hat she held in her lap; that her eyes were closed, her lips,—even that firmly held lower one,—quivering piteously; and over the white softness of her cheek a tear moved slowly.

CHAPTER II

CAMILLE BERENICIA COMES HOME

THE uneven road ran, or better, loitered, along a *coulée*,—a little branch bayou, deep as a moat, seldom wider than a brook, often not as wide; winding and beguiling as a brook, but placid and quiet-watered, almost as still as a pool. It was only by watching the cherokee rose-petals that glided like becalmed elfin craft upon its surface that the waters could be seen to move.

Tranquille was the name of the *coulée*, and tranquilly the banks of young Southern maple, water oak and willow arched gentle arms above it. Budded iris had stepped into the stream out of a tangle of the pink-tipped foliage of the trumpet-vine. On the stump of an old cypress in the water, a new little crown of green twigs was resting. In the center of this fairy ring, a turtle slept.

Berne watched the turtle a moment from the humpy little road, then turned, with a shadow of reluctance, to the old gate facing the stream.

Over the span of the gateway an intertwining of wistaria and jasmine vines,—the white wistaria still in bloom,—made an arch between two sentinel oleanders rubescent with buds.

Both vines and shrubs were hopelessly in need of trimming, but Berne wound several branches back upon themselves in a futile effort for order. So, too, she brushed away leaves from the gate-step with an impatient foot. With dissatisfaction she looked up the path, between the overgrown ranks of the lush shell-lily plants that bordered it. As one does, returning after an absence to a well-known spot, she glanced over house and grove and garden, seeing them with freshened vision.

The wide, sweeping lawns were unkempt; piles of old moss from the great live-oaks lay everywhere. Moss had fallen from these higher trees to the lower ones, clinging even to the smooth leaves of palms and bananas; the very telephone-wire was roped with gray moss. The flower-beds were so over-grown with tall grass that now the Castilian roses and red lilies were growing not in beds at all but in the grass itself, wherever they did not stand knee-deep in vagabond ivy. The evergreens were rusty for want of pruning; the orange trees had all gone to leaf and branch; vines had taken possession of the corrugated towers of dead or dying date-palms. Only the oaks and magnolias, a noble hackberry and the gay little onyx Japan-plum trees seemed to have escaped the general aura of shabbiness; and even some of the oaks were being devoured by the insidious teeth of mistletoe.

The house was old-fashioned, brick, painted white,—but the white had peeled in many places,—

with a yellow-plaster front and yellow-plaster Doric columns. An outside stairway led, through a riot of wistaria, from the brick terrace to an upper shuttered gallery,—shuttered except where the blinds had been torn away by the weight of the vines.

“Sweet place to invite any one to!” said Berne.

Then she glanced upward with sudden pleasure.

“Well, my little ones, *your* houses are all proper, anyway,” she said.

On trees and porch and broken arbors were bird-houses, a veritable colony of them, rustic-finish cabinlets and cottages shiny with paint. Berne watched the little dwellings a moment, hoping for a glimpse of perky head or darting wing, before she pushed open the heavy front door.

The great room was agreeably shadowy and cool on this warm spring day. It extended the full depth of the house; a doorway at the rear led to a vista of untended garden; and, beyond the garden in the distance, the eye was pleasantly conscious of the broad waters of Bayou Vermilion. The room, beautifully furnished in the sturdiest of the styles of Napoleon’s Empire, though now out at elbows, was exquisitely cared for. Little red Louis-Philippe roses, in a great glass bowl, perfumed it.

At a small *escritoire* in one window, a young man in fashionable riding clothes was writing a letter, his head bent above it. He heard the door open, but did not indicate that he had done so. Berne

caught that under lip in her teeth as she regarded him.

In the other window, seated upon its broad ledge, an older man was smoking a carved meerschaum. He wore a rusty black silk dressing gown and morocco slippers that had once been red. He was well-made, graceful, agreeable to the eye; his iron-gray hair too vigorous for a face of pallid delicacy. His hands were nervous. He sat restlessly as if he were half minded to rise. A small, empty coffee-cup was beside him.

He did rise as his daughter entered, rose with an emphasis that brought the young man also upright for a moment.

"Fiammetta, my dear," said her father as she kissed him. "It's good to have you home again."

"'Lo, Camille," said the red-haired young man at the desk, resuming his note. "Did you walk up?"

"Naturally. There was no one to meet me. Where are Uncle Hope and the mule-cart?"

"I don't know. Ovide took the buggy to Curéville to be re-tired. And your horse—"

"Oh, that's all right!—Feeling pretty well, Commodore?" to her father.

"Why,—well enough, well enough. Horribly busy, of course. So much to think of,—to do."

Berne caught her lip. "I know, honey," she said, avoiding the wink of the wicked brown eye the red-haired youth raised above the desk.

"What sort of a time did you have, sweetness?" asked the senior La Grande.

"A hellish time," said Berne.

Her father raised his hands, shocked, but smiling. Landry looked up.

"Camille, I do wish you wouldn't," he said peevishly. "Please try to speak like a lady, at least, if you can't act like one."

"All right, brother," calmly. "I thought maybe it was time for somebody around here to speak and act like a *man*."

Her father laughed, clapped his hands softly; he knew that her rejoinder had no reference to him. He glanced roguishly at his son, who kept on writing.

"I had a highly uncomfortable time, Commodore," Berne amended, sitting beside him. "They did not want to extend the note again. Mr. Auguste said he thought—the bank thought—"

"But they did extend it," Mr. La Grande said hurriedly, eager to avoid hearing what he did not like to hear. "They did extend it. Never mind the unpleasant preliminaries. All over now, dearest! You're a wonderful little lady. And you were right, my dear, as usual. It *was* much better for us to go and see them. So sorry I couldn't do it myself! My health,—and the work on this plantation—"

"Yes, sir," said his son. "Too bad you didn't go! Much more dignified. *I* simply couldn't

afford to, now. You told them I didn't know anything about it, Camille?"

"No, Landry. I didn't."

"I asked you to! Why—"

"Not my way. However, I don't believe Mr. Auguste thought of you at all. Don't worry. Nobody but me thought you ought to have gone.—Give me that coffee-cup, Commodore."

"No; leave it. Tiny will come for it."

"Tiny has so much to do, dear!"

"That's true. I keep forgetting how few servants,—how times have changed for us."

"That's right, darling. *Do* forget it."

She took the cup and left them.

Her brother put down his pen. "Will you tell me, sir, how the Mater ever was the mother of a daughter like that? Why, there's no *girl* in her!"

His father smiled cryptically, an enigmatic expression that always drove Landry mad. "It doesn't mean a thing, and you know it doesn't; yet you can't help wondering what it means," he often complained to his sympathetic mother.

Berne came back into the doorway, the cup still in her hand.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you, Commodore. Daniel Bardé is in the parish. You remember *Gai-Da*? I saw him on the train."

"And knew him? Why, you were an infant—"

"Oh, of course, I shouldn't have if I hadn't heard about his coming when I was in New Orleans."

"Did you look for the scar on his forehead?" Landry asked teasingly.

Her color heightened. "No," she answered.

"Pardon, sis! That was mean.—Dan's coming will interest Mater," Landry added with a sly inflection.

"On my account, you mean? Oh, no! Dan's not as eligible as Martin."

"What a thing to say! Haven't you *any* delicacy, Camille?"

"Oh, come, my dear fellow! You know that's what you meant. Dan was looking awfully knocked up, Commodore. The war got to him they say."

"So, my dear? We must ask him here."

"Whatever Mater says. He used to love to come when he was little. But he'll have more fun, other places, I'm afraid."

"That's true, sir. Why can't I put him up later at the club in town instead?"

"This is our home, my son. Are you ashamed of the old place?" The sweetish tenor of Mr. La Grande's voice grew plaintive.

"The place is all right," said Berne. "It's what hasn't been done for it Landry's ashamed of."

Then she looked at her brother, smiled with sudden tenderness; she was lovely when she smiled. She went over to him put her hand on his shoulder, leaned her cheek against his hair.

"Forgive me, Lanny dear. I'm a beast to you. I'm sorry. But I've had a—very difficult time and

come home cranky. Let's not scrap, buddy. *Pax?*"

He covered her hand with his. "Surely old girl. But, you see how it is, Camille. You *must* watch your disposition. You realize afterwards, but—"

"O Lord! What's the use?" said Berne, and went out with the cup.

The back of the house was shaped like three sides of a square, with wooden cloistered corridors making an incomplete patio.

Berne took the cup to the kitchen wing.

"How-dye, Singsie!" She spoke to the young brown cook in charge there.

"Well, hyere comes Missy! Shall I draw you a cup o' coffee, Missy? You sho' looks all tuckered out. Po' li'l lamb! You works too hard; you's got too much to think about. 'Taint no use fo' de brain o' man to use itse'f up thinkin'. Set down, pretty, out yonder in de hammock and let yo' Singsie do somethin' fo' you."

"You've done something for me already, Singsie." She smiled her rare smile. "Just what I needed."

"Ain't done nothin' yet," in surprise.

"Well, give me some coffee, please. And a cookie. Oh! That smells good! Nobody makes coffee like Singsie,—not even at *Antoine's* in the city."

"Oh, you go along, Missy!" she giggled, delighted. "You's just a-buzzin' me; isn't you?"

"Not a bit. It's true. I'll sit here and drink it; I want to talk to you, Singsie."

"Now, looky hyere, Missy! Is you gwine pester me again, talkin' about wages? 'Cause if'n you is, I isn't gwine listen at it; 'deed I ain't. You just go on keepin' dem wages fo' me, 'cause I hasn't got no manner of use fo' money. Ain't I's got a neat li'l cabin out yonder in de yard fo' me and ma Maw to live in? Ain't you always guv me ma contribution fo' de contribution-plate to pay dat lazy Reverend on Sunday fo' loafin' all week? Ain't I's got good calico dresses, and feastin' on de fat o' de land? What-for I wants money? Ma sakes! If'n I had all dat money I'd likely be fool-headed enough to buy me a man and git married," she laughed. "And never have another thing to call ma own as long as I live, fo'ever,—amen!"

Berne's lower lip was pressed hard before she said, "Th-thank you, Singsie. But I *must* tell you—"

"Dey ain't no *buts* to it. Dis-hyere goat's got his horns cut off; he cayn't butt none.—Oh, lookee! Yo' Paw's signallin' to you, chile." Singsie drew a breath of relief. "Yonder,—in de doorway. But finish up yo' coffee, first off. You needs it."

Good Singsie drew a breath of relief, but something like alarm stared for a moment out of Berne's quiet eyes as she saw her father, pulling nervously at his pipe, side-glancing toward his son to be sure that Landry was not looking at him, as he flashed a brisk, calling finger toward Berne.

Seeing that she understood, he walked off through

the tangled grasses, around the house, away from the windows, down a narrow path peppered with the last particles of old gravel, screened by shrubs and sweet with lemon verbena.

Berne squared her shoulders and followed him.

"Want me, Commodore?" she asked, overtaking him, slipped her arm in his.

"Yes, daughter. Yes," nervously. He hesitated.

She helped him over his embarrassment. "I sold the car," she said. "Couldn't get more than a thousand for it. But that will help repair the pump and tractor in the rice-fields and pay for another shovel-man. That's why I didn't tell Landry,—afraid he'd think they needed it more in the city. It will be such a relief to be sure of another shovel-man! And that pump! An old worn-out pump that works *sometimes*, with an old-fashioned, ever-breaking gasoline tractor to run it, is my idea of purgatory. If we send to Kalamazoo for new parts right away, maybe they'll come in time."

Her father faltered, blushed.

"It would be excellent, dear. And I'm sure we'll be able to take care of both very soon."

"Soon? We must do it right away. Oh!" with a note of angry disappointment. She controlled it quickly and said in a quiet but rather breathless voice, "You want the money,—for something else?"

"Why,—please don't care, Fiammetta,—I must have it. I've a plan on foot, my dear,—something

that will make us rich, free us from this harassing, humiliating— I'm not ready, just yet, to tell about it. But you'll see. You'll *all* see! Just a little more patience! It's almost a miracle, this thing. Almost a miracle. But I shall have to use that money. Sorry!"

It was his, of course. There was nothing to be done.

"The check is already deposited in your bank, Commodore," was all Berne said.

He put his arm about her. "My girl is disappointed," he said sadly, drew her to him.

"I—we—must put that tractor in repair. Can't do without another shovel-man. Onestide is rheumatic; it's too much for him." She had to stop a moment, then spoke calmly in that high, clear voice. "You know when I—we—couldn't afford to keep up the cane—after what sugar's been going through!—and you—we—didn't put in enough diversified truck in that southwest corner,— I do wish you—we—had!—why, Daddy dear, you know we agreed that we've got to look after the rice. The cattle on Savane Salée won't begin to carry the place. We've planted so late, anyway,—if the grass comes with the rice—and not water enough to drown it out—"

"Always the plantation first!" He pinched her cheek. "It isn't the only thing we can do,—depend upon,—my dear!"

"It's real," she began. Then seeing a look of deep hurt on his face, she smiled at him. "All

right. You is de big boss, Boss," she said. "Reckon it'll all go well."

"That's my good girl. Trust me. It is going well. If you only knew!" His eyes burned with a vision. Then he half whispered, "Please,—let's not mention this affair to Landry—or your mother. Little partner! We'll wait and surprise them."

He changed the topic, knew how to intrigue her. "Did you see the small brother?"

Berne's face glowed like a proud mother's. "Of course! He's doing so well! But, of course, Mater told you. Head of his class and his company, and the other little fellows are strong for him. Dr. Mercier says he'll head the school someday. Not homesick a bit. I didn't quite like that,—jealous!" She laughed at herself.

"And you, little woman, didn't you have any *fun* in the city?"

"People were very good to me. But I wasn't feeling very butterfly. I'm afraid I was poky. I do wish I could bob up serenely as Mater does. You should have seen her sparkle. Po' li'l me! I could just watch her and blink. Darling, I'm a changeling, I believe. Or didn't you *find* me somewhere, you and Mater?"

"Um-h'm. In a bird's nest."

"That's nice. That's why we're at home together," she waved her hand to a mocking bird. "*Commodore!* Who is that man? There! Look! In the road."

"I didn't see a man. What sort of man?"

"Gone now. Rough. He's been hanging around here before. I saw him. Don't like the look of him. He's buzzardy."

"Little '*Cajan!* Suspicious of strangers."

"No; I'm not.—But he looks *queer*." She glanced up, saw that her father had lost color, was wetting his lips. "Daddy, are you ill?"

"No, no. Just a little tired. I've been feeling rather rocky lately. I'll go inside. No; don't come with me. I'm all right. Truly. I'll lie down awhile."

She watched him anxiously until he had entered the back door into the great room. Then she turned into the garden again.

As the path rounded toward the front of the house, she saw her father standing in the doorway.

He was waving his arms frantically as if signalling to some one to be off.

Her glance followed his gesture.

She saw the strange man, the man she had called a buzzard, standing on a little rise in the road.

He saw her at the same moment, snatched his eyes away from hers, lifted a dirty hand in answer to her father's warning, disappeared into the underbrush near the *coulée*.

Mr. La Grande, very pale, went to the couch, stretched himself upon it. He hoped his daughter had not seen him in the doorway.

After a blank moment of shock, Berne ran down

the central walk between the lush ranks of the shell-lily plants, out of the gate beneath the vine-tangle, and into the winding road beside the *coulée*.

She could see that man emerging from the underbrush ahead of her. He slipped around a curve in the road.

Berne followed him.

CHAPTER III

WEARY WINGS

WHEN Berne came back to the vine-entangled gate, she saw a small black girl in gay Turkey-red calico, perched upon it, swinging, Berne thought, like a cardinal on a twig.

The little darkey scrambled down to meet her.

"Law sakes, Missy!" she expostulated. "Just look at yo'se'f! You's all muddy and tored. Um-m! You better be mighty glad you isn't me. If'n I come home to Sis Tiny lookin' like you does, I'd be scared to step in de house. She'd lam de hide off ma back. Just look-a yo' pretty shoes, all byah mud! Just look-a yo' waist all ripped in de sleeve! Yo' hair's all comin' scraggly—"

"Yes, yes, Beetee; I know. Were you waiting at the gate for *me*?"

"Yas'm. Singsie, she told me I's obliged to stand hyere and watch fo' Missy."

"What for?"

"Fo' to tell Missy to go in de back way or up de gallery stairs and up to Missy's room, and fix yo'se'f, before anybody see you. 'Cause yo' Maw done come home and brung company."

Berne sighed.

"All right. Come on in, then. Good Singsie, to warn me!"

"Yas'm; Singsie's good *enough*. But 'twas *me* done watched fo' you."

Berne pinched the round black cheek. "Good little Beetee, too! Beetee, did Uncle Hope hire anybody to help him, while I was away? I saw a strange man around."

"No'm.—Missy, honey, is you done saw him, too?" Her eyes showing the whites, frightened.

"Saw whom, Beetee?"

They stopped, facing each other, under the pomegranate tree near the house.

"Prowler. Dat's who. Is you done saw de Prowler?"

"The Prowler, Beetee?"

"Um-hu. Comes prowlin' around hyere and slinkin' off when somebody's lookin'. Unc' Hope done told yo' Paw about dat Prowler; but Mr. La Grande just laugh and say, 'He a po' harmless man; leave him alone. I knows him.' "

"Mr. La Grande said he knew him?"

"Yas'm. But Unc' Hope don't like nobody what prowls. Dat's what he say. Um-mm. He say, 'I just natchelly doesn't care fo' nobody what prowls.' And me, too. I's de same way. I ain't got no taste fo' prowlers, neither.—You's lookin' kinder peaked, Missy."

"I'm all right. Tell Singsie I said, 'Thank you.'"

I'm going up to my room to rest awhile before I dress."

"Please'm, kin I come brush yo' hair?"

"Yes; you may, Bee. In about ten minutes."

Berne went up the creaking outside stairway, thrusting aside the vines. She entered her own room through a long window on the upper gallery, began taking off her clothes. A ray of afternoon sun fell upon her, turning her white shoulders to golden and her hair to crimson.

When Beetee came in, Berne lay on the couch in a scarlet wrapper, her bare feet on a sweet-grass pillow, her head flat, the gorgeous crimsoned cascade of her hair falling from the couch to the floor.

Beetee drew up a stool into the sunlight and began to brush the silken abundance, with little clucks of pleasure.

From below stairs they heard voices and laughter.

A knock at the door was followed by, "Are you there, Fiammetta?"

"Come in, Commodore."

"What a brilliant picture!" Mr. La Grande was surprised into a sudden admiration for his daughter. He never thought of her as beautiful. "All those golds and reds,—and the touch of black!" He laughed. "You should dress to bring out the color of you, Flame, not always go 'half hidden from the eye.' "

"Did you want me, Commodore?"

He had been avoiding her eyes, but she looked straight for his.

"Just to see if you were home. Mater's back and has brought people for dinner. Where have you been, Flame dear?"

"Down the road."

He gave her a quick side-glance, was afraid to proceed.

"Come downstairs as soon as you're rested. Mater'll like it. And—a pretty frock, eh?"

"Who's there?"

"Elodi Huval and young Mrs. Droussard."

"That's nice."

He hesitated.

"And?"

"And Martin Pinckney."

"Is Mr. Pinckney to stay here?"

"Oh, no! He came from the city with your mother; but he's visiting over at Petite Anse. Coming soon?"

"I'll be down soon. Has any one said anything about *Gai-Da*?"

"Daniel Bardé? Nothing more than you told me. He's at his grandfather's. They don't want receptions or celebrations. He must rest."

"Poor *Gai-Da*! All right. I'm coming."

"Shall I git out de blue dress full o' jingle beads, Missy?" Beete asked when he had gone.

"No; thank you, Beete. I'm not going to get all duded up."

Berne rose, opened the old mahogany *armoire*-doors and lifted down a plain frock of French-blue linen.

"Oh! Miss Berne, honey! You isn't gwine-a wore dat conventorphum dress fo' *company*!" Beetee begged.

"Conven—*what* did you call it, child?"

"Orphum. Like de li'l orphums in de convent."

Berne laughed. "It'll be fancier when I put on the lace collars and cuffs," she comforted her. "Why, look how gay I shall be! Red,"—pointing to her hair,—"white and blue. Like the Flag."

"Yas'm," Beetee accepted, unconvinced. "Miss Elodi, she got on a pink dress, with pink bead dollars and dimes all over her chest and a pink rope 'round her waist. And she done had on a big, floppy hat with a feather—"

"What kind of a feather?"

"No'm. None o' yo' birds. It's a *funeral* feather. Like on top of a hearse. Just *lubly*!"

But Berne resisted the suggestions of ceremonial array and put on the conventual blue with its little lace collar and cuffs.

Uncle Hope, called from the fields to serve as butler in the evening, in all the pride of his "company clothes," was lighting the lamps when she entered the room.

Her father was talking to Mrs. Droussard, a slender and beautiful blond matron, not much older than Berne.

Landry sat on the window-seat, doing the devoted to fluttering little Elodi,—all soft flesh, cream-white, with black-satin hair and splendid eyes that must have been dangerous in her Latin-European ancestresses, but in her were softened into typical Créole-Acadian gentle warmth and modest sweetness. Her tiny feet, prettily shod, were so consciously well-placed it was obvious that Elodi was proud of them.

Mrs. La Grande directed her dashing daintiness to Martin Pinckney, a tall, youngish man, who was dutifully flattering her.

Berne's mother had eyes as fine as her daughter's, but they were hazel and not held wide and still like Berne's. She used them artistically, with an affectation that had become natural through long custom. She had a piquant little face with a dramatic ability in it that made it seem expressive of more than she actually felt. Her red-brown hair had been henna treated; but she had had the good sense to give verisimilitude by leaving a few light touches of gray where they did no damage. She was small and had the kind of good figure that men prefer even in these times of the boy-form cult.

"So, I was just about to dance with the boy," she was saying. "He'd heard Helen Thurston call me 'Alice La Grande,' so *he* said, '*Miss La Grande*,' Heaven bless him! I let him think it—thanking Father Time for the unexpected reprieve—when my cruel son arrived and said, 'O Mater!' Isn't that unnatural treatment? Of course, the boy stared.

He was frightened; almost accused me of getting a dance under false pretenses. So I let him go," sighing.

"*That* was cruel, to him," said Martin Pinckney gallantly.

"Sweet thing, Martin! But I owe *you* one, Landry, old dear!"

"Oh! About that midshipman. Sorry. But I'm too proud of the Mater not to claim her. Besides, you see, I chaperon for Dad."

Berne stood in the doorway unobserved for a few minutes. Then Mrs. Droussard saw her. They exchanged the glance of friendship.

"Bright nun," Ellen Droussard whispered as Berne took her hand. "Wearing another pinafore! If you think you hide yourself in those plain things, the joke's on you."

Berne smiled. "I'm so glad you came, Nelly dear."

She kissed her mother and Elodi, extended her hand to Martin. He looked at her half affectionately, half in appraisement, a pucker between his brows.

"I'm back again," he said. "Told you I'd be here before the cardinals."

"That's good. It's nice that Mater brought you."

He colored, laughed, turned again to Mrs. La Grande, almost quickly enough to see a flash of temper restore itself into a smile on her face.

But Berne had received the flash; her head dropped for a moment like a sad child's.

Ellen Droussard was at her side again. "Tired, Berne?" she asked, as they walked away together.

"Ah, *chère!* How I am tired!"

"Doing too much?"

"No; I think not."

"Tired of what, then?"

"*La vie.* Just 'plum wore out' with life," but she smiled.

Mrs. Droussard laughed. "Tired of life! At your youth!"

"But that's just the point, my dear."

"You're too subtle for me, Berenicia."

"Not subtle a bit. Said exactly what I mean. But let's not talk about me. Come; desert the Commodore, and let's sit over there by Elodi and Landry and have a chatter."

"Oh! Not by *them!*"

"Why not?"

"My dear! Be kind to them."

"What? You don't mean you think Landry and Elodi—are interested?"

"You certainly are direct," Mrs. Droussard said.

"Why not, Nelly? *Do* you think so?"

Mrs. Droussard made a helpless gesture. "Would you like it, Berne? I shall be direct, too, you see. Would you care to have them interested?"

"Oh! I love Elodi!"

"Of course. But don't evade; that isn't what I asked you."

"Aren't we a little premature? Romantic Nelly! Come; let's sit by them. What nonsense!"

But when they joined Elodi and Landry, Berne was markedly silent, even for her, and regarded them thoughtfully.

Her father, an effective host, sauntered back and forth between their group and Mrs. La Grande who was exploiting her pretty profile. Pinckney played up to her, and liked to; but she was pleased to see that his eyes kept a supplementary interest in Berne.

He was asking himself whether Berne actually attracted him despite her mother's obviously managing him towards her, or whether he had no real interest in her at all but was merely entrapped by her resistance to *madame's* maneuvers. She certainly was a dour young thing. Almost caustic. Pretty, if she dressed better. That hair! They'd certainly put him next her at dinner. Berne would hate it, and that would provide an amusing situation.

When he did take his seat beside her at dinner he roused her beyond his expectations.

He was saying, "Too bad about Dan Bardé; isn't it? Frightfully 'done!' Cantrelle and I dragged him about until the poor chap frankly begged us not to try to entertain him; said he needed to be alone."

"He will get well, though," Berne stated firmly.

"Oh! To be hope'!" cried Elodi, clasping her hands. "I saw him when he passed from the train today; and, *chère*, it is a crime to permit that a *man* can be so beautiful!"

"Louisiana will make him well," said Berne. "You know the legend about Bayou Vermilion?" to Martin. "When you have once sailed Vermilion water, you *must* come back to it, and when her children come in illness, the old bayou restores them."

"You believe that?"

"I have found the bayou very restorative."

"It is Berenicia's bayou," said Elodi. "More than the pilots and those fishermen, even, Berne, she knows that bayou. You must believe all she tells of Vermilion."

"You must get her to show it to you," Ellen Droussard suggested to tease Berne. "It's a gem of a stream."

"Wild and very romantic; isn't it, dear?" Mater appealed to her husband's cryptic smile. "You should see it under the moon, Martin."

"Let's do it," Martin Pinckney took his cue. "We ought to take Daniel Bardé with us, I suppose," he added to Berne.

"I mean to take him on the bayou," said Berne.

Martin laughed, but he was chagrinned. That was almost rude, he thought.

Berne had not meant to be rude. "You'd be

bored, I'm sure," she hastened to say, reading his thought. "But, of course I shall be glad to show you the bayou, if you really want to see it."

He absolved her with a look, but her mother was not so forgiving.

"Miss Berenicia is right to be interested in Bardé," Martin said. "For she was the only thing in New Orleans in which *he* showed the slightest interest."

"In *me*?"

"Saw you at the theater and asked questions." He had his private revenge on Berne, recalling that conversation and Cantrelle's description of her.

Under cover of the general talk, she asked him, "Did you tell Dan Bardé who I was?"

Taken off guard, he replied, "No." Then flushing, under her wide gaze, he hastened to explain, "We wanted to keep him guessing. Good for him." But he feared this girl saw through him. A most detestable trait in woman, he thought, the ability to see through you.

He did not return to the project of touring Bayou Vermilion as he had intended to do, before leaving that night; but drove off with the others, bidding Berne good-night rather stiffly.

Mrs. La Grande's pretty gaiety departed with her guests.

She was suddenly dejected, pitying herself to the point of tears, would soon lash herself into a lady-like hysteria.

Berne braced herself for a scene; she knew all the symptoms. They always began as now with an appalling coldness, an atmosphere of injury stoically borne, of patient martyrdom that goaded the victims into the mistake of fawning, cajoling, begging to be told what the matter was, putting up some groping self-defense, trying to appease. Then came the temper and tears.

When Mr. La Grande or Landry was enrolled as culprit in these dramas, they always surrendered early, put themselves in the wrong, became alarmed, wretchedly protective, found themselves apologizing for sins they had not committed, or volunteering promises that had been the little lady's objective from the start.

But Berne was a woman and knew by instinct that the temptation to use weakness and suffering as weapons is in every woman's soul, inherited from the days when her dependence was woman's only strength; and she felt in her own soul that the test of a woman is the degree of her resistance to this temptation toward emotional bullying. Berne loved her pretty, temperamental mother, rejoiced in her charm; but she had a fine contempt for scenes like these and refused to be cowed by them. There is a hardness in youth; there is no denying it.

"Mater," she said now, inexpressibly weary. "Please don't. If you're going to have a weep because I didn't show off for Martin Pinckney, I'm sorry as can be. I don't want to make you weep,

—God knows. But why should I show off for him? I can't; that's all."

" 'Show off!' How dare you accuse me of such vulgar intentions? Because I want you to look well—pretty—for guests! Because I have some pride in you, if you haven't for yourself! Don't think I'm blind, my dear. To appear before a man like Martin Pinckney dressed as a *waitress*! To snub him! It's insulting to *me* to snub my guests."

" 'Snub,' Mater dear?"

"Don't appear innocent. Landry noticed it, too. And your father. Didn't you?"

Mr. La Grande looked forlorn, made no reply.

"Well, at least *Landry* knows what I'm trying to do for us all. If no one else appreciates—"

Mr. La Grande made a feeble protest of affection.

"Yes, indeed, Mater," said Landry, soothingly. "We all appreciate. Even Camille does, though I do think she behaved mighty foolishly to-night."

"Thanks, Bud," said Berne, very white.

"There! Your brother and father agree with me. Don't you?" to her husband.

"Say *yes*, Commodore," said Berne. "I'll understand. Don't mind me."

Then Mrs. La Grande's lady-like hysteria came in a flood, a spoiled child's fit of sobbing. In the midst of it Berne spoke; and her mother's sobs stopped abruptly, chopped sharp by the clear chisel-cut of Berne's voice.

"Stop!" she cried. "I can't stand any more." Then, after a silent moment. "Good-night, Mater dear. I'm sorry. 'Night, Commodore. 'Night, Bud."

Berne went to her room, locked the door.

But later, when the house was quiet, when her mother's light was out, and Landry's, Berne slipped the glorious red gown over her night dress, let her splendid hair fall loose and went downstairs and into the living-room again.

Her father was there, as she knew he would be, reading by the one lighted lamp.

"Flame, dear!" he said pityingly, put his arm around her.

He had pitied and fondled his wife in the same manner a short while before; had let her cry herself comforted on his shoulder. He was sorry for them both. He saw with a sudden pang the shadows under his daughter's eyes.

But Berne had not come to be pitied.

"Commodore," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders, raising her tired eyes to him. "Aren't you ready to tell me about the man—you waved to?"

He started. Then, "No, daughter. Not yet. You—you will have to trust me. I know—"

"Of *course*, Commodore! It's up to you, Boss. You is de big boss, Boss," she smiled. "But I wanted you to know—I knew."

He was vastly unhappy. She patted his arm.

"Commodore, get the fiddle and play for me. There's a dear."

"Too late, honey. They'll be disturbed. Your mother—"

"Oh, very softly! They won't wake, off there in the wing. I *need* it."

She climbed upon one of the broad window-seats. He got his violin.

"What shall I play, dear?"

"Sarasate,—*The Lark*. I want something that soars and sings."

He played. She sat in the shadows of leaves, dappled with moonlight, her shawl of glowing hair touched by the lamplight's fingers. She drew up her knees, dropped her head upon them.

Sarasate's *Lark* sang gently in the room. Outside two rapturous mocking-birds took up the lark's gladness.

At last Berne lifted her head, drew a breath.

"Thank God for birds!" she said. "I'm better now. Thank you, Commodore. Don't read too late. I wonder if Dan Bardé is hearing the mocking-birds. Good-night, dear."

Berne went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD TO THE WOODS

AT breakfast, at the head of his mahogany table, narrow, long and massive, like a refectory board,—it had arrived in Louisiana when Carondelet was Governor,—sat General Odillon Bardé.

As he opened his shrimps, piled pink and high on their bed of ice and red peppers, occasionally he paused, sharpened his eyes,—still keen behind the dulling of age, like flashlights in a fog,—and regarded his grandson, seated mid-table at his right.

Dan had been in bed all of the day before, the day of his arrival in Curéville, pitifully tired. This breakfast time afforded the General his first long scrutiny of him.

General Bardé liked what he saw. A little too good-looking, perhaps. All the Bardé men had that to overcome; the General acknowledged it without conceit; considered it a handicap. The lad had the high cheekbones, the fine deep-set eyes of the *ancêtres*, their strong slightly Caesarian nose and the beguiling mouth that had been the bane of several.

The General stroked his small gray mustache and narrow goatee, conscious of such a mouth between them. But the General's mouth had always been as firm at the corners as it was now. Dan's brought a question to his thought. How much of this languor, this slack, was physical, temporary? Was not part of it temperamental, perhaps? Could part of it be, like the luxuriant hair, feminine,—his mother's?

General Bardé rebuked himself, "On guard!" He must not let his feeling about the mother prejudice him a hair's-breadth against this boy.

"Daniel," he said. "This is a dream come true to me. I suppose you know? To have you seated here."

"Thank you. It's good to be here with you, too, sir."

"*Merci.* Ah! We shall see. Your father was my favorite—I—" the old gentleman wiped a tear, unashamed. "We are not ashamed of feeling, we old Louisianians," he explained. "You have lived in the North, my boy; but you are all the same a Créole of Louisiana. It is a matter of special inheritance, I please myself to think, the feeling of Louisiana in the heart. You have it? No?"

"Why, sir, I—"

"Well! We shall see. If you are one of us,—as I think,—you will have the flame within."

"'The flame within'?"

"It is an expression I learned from a little one

who has it. I wonder if you remember a red-haired child you used to—but, no! How could you remember?”

“Camille La Grande?”

A fine pleasure glowed in the old man's face.

“Ah! You have not entirely forgotten the little days?”

“I'm afraid I don't remember very much. But I've not forgotten the day you bought me my pony, sir, nor—”

“Say '*Grandpère*,' ” the General cried, delighted.

“Nor the time you taught me to swim in the bayou, *Grandpère*, and black Mammy Loulou scolded us.”

“*Admirable!* And you remember Camille,—Berenicia, too?”

“Oh, *she* left me a souvenir,” Daniel laughed, lifting the wave of hair that fell on his forehead.

“You see this wound?” revealing a long, faint scar. “Our small friend and a well-aimed oyster-shell! I had questioned her veracity,—no; it wasn't hers! It was her brother's. He *had* fibbed, too. But I dare say I wasn't very polite about telling them so. Poor kid! How scared she was when she saw the blood! I believe it spouted rather spectacularly. Her face frightened me more than the pain did. Made me think she'd killed me. She stood there so white and sobbing without tears. I can see her yet. I believe we were always scrapping. Is she a pet of yours, sir?”

The old gentleman rose with some difficulty; his cane was hooked behind his chair. He lifted his coffee-cup.

"Berne?" he said. "A pet? A glory! There is a woman, that little girl!" He drank to her.

Daniel was amazed at this new version of Camille La Grande, so different from Cantrelle's and from Mme. Boutin's too. He wondered about it while the General gave orders for the day, in French, to the old negro who served them.

But this one's attention wandered to Daniel. "*Dieu de dieu!*" he kept muttering happily to himself. "*Gai-Da! Chez-lui! Ts, ts, ts!*"

Dan offered his arm as they left the table together; but General Bardé kept his weight on his cane.

"Later, my boy," he said, patting his hand. "When you are strong. Have patience with thyself, dear lad. I understand. I, too, have been a soldier."

They sat on the shaded porch of the broad old homestead at the end of an avenue of oaks that led to the dusty village street. The perfume of the morning filled the air.

Dan made an effort at conversation, could see that his grandfather liked to talk about Flame.

"Where does she live, your *protégée*,—in the old place?"

"*'Protégée'*! Berne should hear you! Yes; they still live, the La Grandes, on Ile Imaginaire, though

madame maintains also an apartment in New Orleans with Landry,—the boy who fibbed to you.”

“*Ile?* I don’t seem to recall the place as an island.”

“And therefore Imaginaire, perhaps!” He laughed. “But, no. They are islands,—after a fashion. A chain of them,—land islands, hilly and wooded, set in the sea of prairies, divided from the flat lands by bayous and *coulées*; a strange and—we think in these parishes—a delightful formation. The only high land in the Coast parishes. *Ile Imaginaire* is the least of them. They are due, many think, to the salt. The salt mines should interest you—an engineer. Well, soon you shall see everything.”

“May I see the country to-day, sir, a little? You said something last night about Uncle Douglas and the buggy. I think ambling along these roads would be pleasant.”

Anything would be better, he thought, than sitting still thinking, or driving himself to conversation,—or, worse, having neighbors come to inspect him.

Of that there was no danger. Though he did not know it, he had already been inspected upon his arrival, from behind many a drawn blind. Understanding kindness had hidden the observers, as it had filled the old house with cut flowers and the General’s larder with jellies and fresh-baked *brioche* and newly caught terrapin and eggs clear as lanterns and a bucket of milk foaming with cream.

Already the neighbors were talking about him in gossipy groups under the lilac-flowered chinaberry trees and over cigars on the benches of the courthouse square. And not a word but friendship prompted it!

"To be sure! Baptiste shall call old Douglas. Landry La Grande, I was saying, has just purchased a seat on the Exchange. They sold the city house, a good place of the old *régime*, to pay for it; and probably much else. Landry is the pampered heart's-dear of his mother. The worse for him!"

His keen eyes saw his grandson start, blush, look troubled at that. "Ah! I feared as much. But there is good hope if the lad knows it," thought General Bardé.

"They are not rich, then?"

"Rich! *Ciel!* The epic of rice and cane and cotton and cattle in these days,—will some one write it?—how this far-South suffers in supplying these most useful things! But La Grande, *père*, would never be rich, even in better times. Your friend, Raoul Cantrelle,—who has a Balsacian tongue,—calls him 'The Crookometer,' says any one who can resist imposing on La Grande is completely honest. One scheme after another, usually little balloons; gas, explosion, collapse! And *madame*,—the beautiful ladies must have social life, of course. This is altogether natural. But it is no longer inexpen-

sive, in these days. And the golden one must bear all on her little straight shoulders!"

"Why must she?"

"Why?" The General paused, arrested by the question. "No one ever thought to ask that before," he said, with a twinkling eye. "Why? Because she is Berne, I suppose. Or,—*tiens!*—because she can. That is the answer. Because she can. It is a rule of life. Who can, must."

"Pretty hard on the kid, though." Dan was remembering that unguarded moment on the train.

"Yes. But it is not easy to pity Berenicia. You shall see." The General held her in his mind in silence, picturing her as, indeed, she was that morning, in her suit like a Boy Scout's, on horseback since dawn, hatless, the early sun making aureoles in her hair.

Berne was all for business now, no longer the girl of train or window-seat.

The negroes, men and women, working in her fields, who raised themselves from their hoes as she passed, the Acadian shovel-man,—white but burned to copper,—walking the dikes of the paneled rice-field that skirted Bayou Vermilion, the black cow boy on the green-gold flat *savane*, saluted her warmly; but not with the holiday tenderness they reserved for ladies driving by. Berne was Boss here; they came to her for orders, for protection, for privilege, treated her as the head of the plan-

tation, just as they did "Mister Jonas" of Gertrude or "Mister Ned" of Petite Anse, or any of the great masculine planters of the neighborhood.

But many looked after her with a vague expression of pride-with-sorrow, or muttered "Po' lamb" or "Lawd he'p us all!" as the horse went on. Aunt Ellie in the plowed field, old and wise, expressed it. "If'n de plantation was only doin' mo' prosperous, or if Missy yonder was a *boy*, seems as how 'twould be mo' natural. But de days and de ways is de Lawd's and de curiouser things is de less cure dey is fo' dem. So best just keep on diggin'." Sighing, she wiped her hands on her tan head-dress bandanna, tucked up her skirt a little higher under the rusty man's-coat she wore, dug into the rich black earth.

Across the raised road between the sky-blue, flooded panels of the rice fields, the raised road that skirted the flowery *coulée*, the hoof-beats of another horse were heard, pounding fast.

Into the open of the main highway, where the great oak marked the turn, this horse appeared, a glorious "blue" filly, high-bred, light as a dancer, graceful as a bird. On her back, a young man in jeans, with an overseas cap on his head and his bright-blue eyes hungry for Berne.

He gave a whoop when he saw her and the little mare fairly flew to overtake her.

Berne was busy with the shovel-man, trying to satisfy him that the pump and tractor would be re-

paired before real damage could happen, trying to reassure him that there would soon be another man to help him open and shut the dikes, to take his place when his rheumatism insisted.

"But Miss Berne, *chère*," said poor Onestide, his gray head shaking and a tear on the copper of his cheek. "This rice, she got to be protect.' No use plant him, if we cannot protect. Maybe come' no rain. Maybe the bayou go low. Maybe we got take good care this salt Gulf water, she not pass in, back up in the rice—"

"God forbid!"

"Sometimes care in good time, it help God to forbid, Miss Berne. Also the little levees, you *know* they must be watch'. This rice, she got to have enough water, not too much. This rice, she is like the ladies,—you got to be experienced man to know just what she want; is it not?" He allowed himself a chortle. "Got to have good man help me. Yes. And how we goin' keep enough right water pass here in the rice, if we got no good pump, Miss Berne?"

"She'll do for awhile, Onestide. Don't worry. Mr. Jonas is coming to look after her for us."

"To look! *Dieu te bénisse*! Monsieur Jonas is very wise man, very fine planter, very good neighbor, yes,—but he cannot make good a pump by looking at him. Oo—ee!"

"Don't cry, Onestide. He'll find a way to fix it. You'll see. Things will be better soon. *Au'voir*,

Onestide.—Hello, Odrasse! *Va bien?*” to the boy on the “blue” filly, who took off his cap, devoured her with his eyes.

He had been waving to her as he came and resented the absorption that withheld her response. He held back his lively young mare to keep pace with her slower horse, as she turned again into the road.

“Good to be home!” said Berne. “What a morning!” She breathed deep of the cherokee roses that made miles of natural hedges, and lifted her eyes to the distance where the woods began, blue-green with cypress trees, black-jade with water-oak and magnolia.

“This is where you belong, Berne. Not in the city. Isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Berne?”

“Odrasse?”

“They’re *not* going to sell Ile Imaginaire,—your parents?” His voice was not quite steady.

“What do you mean?” She turned in the saddle, faced him.

“Then, they’re *not?*”

“Of course not. What did you mean, Odrasse?”

“I’m so glad it’s not true! They said Mr. La Grande had been trying to sell some land. They said it was foolish now. Market’s down to nothing.”

“All nonsense, ’Drasse.” But her color had

faded. What *had* her father been trying to do?

They were leaving the fields, nearing the mysterious dusky brightness of the sky-line woods.

Behind them, under the oak that marked the joining of *coulée*-road and highway, a slow buggy was turning, bearing brown Uncle Douglas, thin and grizzled but alert and young for all his eighty years, and Dan Bardé, old, listless and languid for all his handsome youth.

Uncle Douglas was boasting of his lusty age. "Yassah; I is old. I is a old man. I was hyere when de stars fell. Dat's a long time back. Niggers ought to stay in de country. You don't see no city niggers old and spry like we-uns is. Ma *age* is old, but ma *actin'* is young. Excusin' mase'f, Mister Daniel, I is 'most as spry as you is."

"Sprier, I'm sure." Dan's eyes were attracted by the two riders far ahead. "That's a fine horse, that grayish one," he said.

"Blue. Yassah. Sho' is. And a fine rider, too. Um-um! Mist' Odrasse kin make dat filly dance on a plate. Yassah. Sho' kin. And *go*! Ought to see dat horse go when he *gits* her goin'! Just holdin' her back now to keep pace with Miss Berne. Mist' Odrasse certainly enjoys followin' Miss Berne around." He chuckled.

"Berne," Odrasse was saying reproachfully. "You didn't write to me when you were in the city."

Berne looked at him in frank astonishment.

"Why, Odrasse, did you expect me to?"

"I went to the post-office every day, every train."

"Why on earth didn't you say you wanted a letter? I was pretty busy; but I'd have gladly written, Odrasse." She gave him a friendly little smile.

"Didn't you think of me at all?"

"Why, yes, I did. I saw a picture of a splendid horse in the Sunday paper, and I cut it out for you because it looked like your Vitesse. But,"—deprecatingly,—“I forgot to bring it.”

He saw that Berne was not coquetting; was simply telling a fact. Elodi Huval, in the days when she had been his girl, Elodi would have played the game. If she had said this, it would have been to provoke him; he'd have teased her in return. But Berne was so direct, so indifferent! It hurt so to love her. She kept *jabbing* a man and never knew she had hurt him. He'd tell her what he felt. He had to. He'd make her know it. He couldn't stand it any more, everybody thinking Berne was his girl,—except Berne.

"I can't stand it, Berne. Listen, Berne," he began, leaning towards her.

But her attention had left him. "Look! Look!" she cried, pointing upward, her face and hand up-raised toward a soaring whiteness against the zenith, to something like a daylight crescent-moon in flight. "A snowy heron! Making for *our* pool; I'm sure."

"Oh, listen, Berne!" Odrasse seized her upraised hand, brought it down, held it.

Daniel Bardé saw this gesture as the horses were disappearing behind a bend in the wooded road.

"Let's stop here awhile, Uncle Douglas," he said, and the buggy slowed up in the shade of a hackberry tree.

Dan told himself he was avoiding spying unintentionally on a possible idyl; but he knew in his heart he was just avoiding looking at what he did not want to see. But why in blazes should he find it disagreeable to see this country boy take Flame's hand?

"All right, sah, Boss," Uncle Douglas was saying. "Us'll turn de buggy 'round, keep you out'n de wind. De East wind is like some folks is,—always on-pleasant, no matter f'um what direction it's a-blowin'."

Meanwhile Odrasse was insisting, "*Please* listen to me."

Berne halted her horse, turned her clear eyes to him. Then she saw in the lad's face what he was trying to say.

"Oh! No! Don't say it. I know what you want to say," she cried quickly. "Sorry, Odrasse. But you'd better not say it, old fellow. Someday you'll be glad you didn't."

His eyes filled. Was ever a girl like this,—so downright?

"Oh, all right,—if you say so!" he grumbled, ex-

asperated. "But you're hard on me. Berne, is there some one else?"

"Nobody except Little Brother." She laughed. "You ought to see him drilling with the big boys. Such a *man!*"

"But you do meet men in the city. You do—"

"Nonsense! Men don't like me and I'm too busy to think about them. You're a child, Odrasse. Why don't you go play with Elodi, as you used to?"

"'Cause I'm *not* a child any more. And Elodi isn't either. She likes—somebody else, too, now. Berne, you're going to let me see you now,—just as often,—just the same?"

"For heaven's sake, why not? What a notion! Now, please, let's not talk about it any more."

After a silence, he complied, "General Bardé's grandson's in the parish; did you know? The one the papers were full of."

"Yes. We came on the same train."

"Oh!—I wish *I*'d got over there before the fighting was almost done. Of course, I don't say I could have—"

"You'd have done as well as any one did. But I'm glad you didn't have to kill anybody. Doesn't belong to you,—killing."

"Why? 'Cause I'm a kid?"

"No. A planter,—a life-giver."

The boy flushed, pleased. "But—you *were* mighty proud about Bardé,—from this parish."

"Yes, indeed." She said it with an unconscious

fervor that rasped his youthful jealousy. "He was my baby playmate, you know."

"Oh!"

The horses were going now under moss-festooned arches of the winding-road; the fans of palmetto edged it, glowing dark against the gay young foliage of the shrubs behind them. Here and there a flowery *coulée* or canal broke glimmering through the under brush. There were many turns in the roadway; the horses were now seen, now lost by Dan in the ambling buggy again following in the distance.

After awhile Berne said, "You say Elodi has a new little romance?"

"They're talking about it. Of course, I don't say it's so." He remembered ruefully that his friends coupled his own name with Berne's.

"Landry?"

"Well, they say so."

"Odrasse, keep a friendly eye on Elodi; won't you? Take her about sometimes,—the way you always did."

"Oh! Elodi can look out for herself!" He laughed.

"Of course. And doesn't need to, with my brother. But just keep in touch with her, please."

"All right. I guess I understand."

"Lan's much older. And used to girls. And not nearly so—intense. That's all. Elodi's such a honey!"

"I'll do anything you want me to, Berne."

"I know it, 'Drasse. And it won't be hard to play around with Elodi. Now, I—I'll have to leave you. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'll have to send you back."

"Why, *why*? Where are *you* going?"

"Into the swamp, a little way."

"Not into the Big Woods!"

"Just a little way."

"But, my dear girl! You can't go into the woods alone. . Maybe swamp niggers— It isn't safe. You *know* that."

"Quite safe. I won't be alone long. And I've this, you know." She drew a small but businesslike Colt from her hip pocket.

Odrasse teased, "Ohho! That looks pretty, for a girl who doesn't like killing."

She answered his smile. "I won't have to use it. Good-by, Odrasse."

"Berne, I simply can't let you go into the swamp by yourself. Your father'd never forgive me. He'd be right, too. I'm going with you."

"I won't be alone, Odrasse. Not long."

"Who, then?"

"An appointment. It's all right. Truly."

"Then why can't I—"

"No, Odrasse. Thank you; but please go back. I assure you I'm safe."

"And won't tell me—"

"So sorry!"

"Good-by, then." He turned sulkily, deeply hurt.

Berne put her hand on his sleeve. He checked rein.

"'Drasse." she said. "I couldn't bear to hurt your feelings. Please don't be *faché*!"

"All right,—dear. Good-by, then."

He went off slowly, frequently looking back in the hope of being recalled. But the horses bore their riders apart until the turning road hid them from each other.

After a little the "blue" filly met a buggy.

Odrasse slowed up, bowed, after the manner of the country; greeted Uncle Douglas with a waving hand and his passenger with "Good morning, sir!" He knew this must be Daniel Bardé. "Fine morning for a drive."

Dan nodded, smiled, said nothing. But Uncle Douglas answered, "Yassah. We isn't gwine much fu'ther, howsomebber. I's just gwine take Mister Daniel to de edge of de Big Woods."

The hypersensitive boy's heart gave a jolt. He rushed headlong to a conclusion. Berne was going to meet Dan Bardé, and had not told him! She wanted to show the Big Woods to Bardé,—alone! Dismissed him like a child!

The "blue" mare went so fast that Odrasse could scarcely have seen the passing landscape, even

had his eyes not been blinded by angry tears.

Berne rode on toward the swamp, her tiny pistol accessible. Her head was held high, wide eyes alert, like the head of a mother-bird, defiant for her nest, on guard.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE MARGE

OVER the trembling floor of the swamp, where first the glimmering ooze changes into true water, a *piroque* glided noiselessly, with the still, snakelike motion of these log dug-out canoes.

A water-moccasin slipped out of the boat's path. The shining waters quivered about it.

The cypress trees and tupelo gums, standing on tall stems like aquatic birds, their arched root-talons in the mud, their glinting plumage high above, seemed to sway gently with the swaying water. Streams of moss waved like the veils of old dryads. Long blades of sunlight, brilliant as acetylene, cut dazzlingly through the gloom. Against the cathedral-window patches of green leaves and blue sky, birds were flying.

The *piroque* stopped beside an open space, where sun and sky shone bright, reflected in the water. Underbrush and vine-tangle made a covert for the boat.

There were two men in it. The man whom Beetee had called "Prowler" held a gun across his knees; a younger man was paddling, punting.

"No more far than here?" this one asked. "You say, 'Stop'? We have not passed in the woods yet. This is only the beginning—"

"Never mind. This'll do. I saw one here yesterday."

"One?"

"Somewhere around here," the Prowler said in a husky undertone. "Be still. Look. There goes one now. Bet he's coming this way."

His companion laughed. "A crane! A heron! We are come to see a crane? But, my friend, I can show you,—other side the woods, over passed the little bayou, toward the plantation of Odrasse Guidry, next by Ile Imaginaire,—I can show m'sieu' a thousand herons. And at Petite Anse,—a hundred thousand."

"Like as not," said Prowler. "But if I shoot a bird now in the Imaginaire heronry it may interfere with my plans. And if I shoot one in the Petite Anse, I'll be shot myself."

The other turned as pale as layers of sunburn would let him. He took up the paddle, began to drive the *piroque* quickly from the underbrush covert.

"What the hell're you doing?" cried the Prowler.

The younger man,—he was big, ungainly, with voluptuous mouth and roving handsome eyes,—said sulkily, "I go home quick, me!"

"Hold on a minute!" The boat slowed. Prowler leaned out, gripped a branch of young

water-maple. "What's eatin' you? What's the matter with you? What you scared of?"

"M'sieu', I will not kill herons. It is not for herons you tell me we go hunt. To kill an egret nowadays, it is to go to jail. Sure pop. *Vraiment*. Mr. Ned of Petite Anse, he would—"

"'Fraid of jail, hey? Not the feller I want for the *big* game, then."

"You have not told me we could go to jail for *that*."

"Not a chance of it. But it takes a he-man, just the same."

"I am not scared of the jail. Ah, *non*. I *been* to jail, me,—two, three time'. But not for killing heron'. The law is very bad nowadays for hunt the plumes. And Mr. Ned of Petite Anse,—and *ma famille*, we *live* on Petite Anse,—you say yourself you scared of him! And Uranie,—if I go me to the jail *encore*,—she goin' marry that damn'—"

"Oh, I won't get you in trouble."

"Hunting plumes—"

"But I'm *not* plume-hunting. I just want one bird. What's one shot,—'way out here? Lots of other things to hunt. Maybe I'm killing a snake or a 'cat', or anything!"

"What for you want a heron? *One* heron pays nothing—"

"Sh!" pointing upward.

Like the dream of a dream, cloudlike, soft and swift, the pure white wings floated overhead, gently

came to rest upon a branch of the cypress. The light made haloes on the wispy moving fringes of plumage.

The Prowler raised his gun.

"Drop it!" cried Camille Berenicia, rising in the underbrush. "Drop that gun! Quick!" Her angry eyes and the eye of the little Colt revolver covered him menacingly.

"Damn!" said the Prowler and dropped the gun.

"*Bonjour*, Miss Berne," the frightened youth began; but Berne did not take her eyes from the Prowler.

"What are you doing on my land?" she asked. "Shooting herons?"

Prowler looked for a tremor in the pistol hand. It held steady. His sharp eyes probed the underbrush. Berne was not in a boat; she had skirted the swamp on logs and mud-banks and stood now on a cypress stump in the underbrush tangle.

"Look out, miss! A snake!" Prowler cried.

Berne laughed. "Reckon not," she said. "And I've boots on. Don't try to trick me into putting down the gun. I'll put it down when you've unloaded yours.—Oh, you needn't! The bird's gone." She had no fear for herself. She put the pistol away. "Now tell me what you're up to on my land."

"Yours, miss? Thought 'twas your dad's. *He* give me leave to come on the plantation. Better ask *him* what I'm up to."

"Yesterday afternoon," Berne said. "I followed you to the hunter's cabin, where you had left that gun. When you'd gone, I questioned him; he told me you'd asked him if it were true that a pair of great white herons had visited here last summer. Why did you want to know that? He said you'd left a message with him for Borel,—to row you here this morning. Here where egrets are building. Why are you after herons? Are you a plume-hunter? I can send you to jail for what I've heard and seen."

"Oh, I guess not! Better ask your father first."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask your father!" He laughed insinuatingly. "Before you go jailing me."

"Listen to me. If you have business with my father, attend to it, and leave the birds alone. Whatever it is, you'd better understand that he won't cover up any misbehavior,—or killing birds."

Prowler snorted.

"But, even if he would,—you get this straight,—I wouldn't. And if you go after plumes around here, you're headed for the penitentiary. *You* get that too, Borel,—you poor fool!"

"*Je vous assure*, Miss Berne,—honest to God, Miss Berne, I never believe this man wish to hunt heron'. *Je ne le connais pas*,—I don't know this man very moch, me. *Non! Non!*"

"Hope you *have* too much sense to hunt plumes,

Borel. You'll get in trouble once too often. Better be thinking what you'll say to Mr. Ned."

"Aw, God! Miss Berne, *chère!* You ain' goin' tell—"

"Mr. Ned is coming here. I sent for him last night. I thought he'd get here before you did. We'll all just wait here and talk this over with him."

"Like hell we will!" said Prowler. "You get this boat out o' here, Borel. *Pronto.*"

"Not any!" Berne's little pistol flashed out. "We're going to settle this now,—with Mr. Ned. It's too much for me; but *he'll* talk to you. I'm going to find out what you're up to, and if it's plume hunting, who's behind you."

"*Mon dieu! Jésus!* Have the pity, Miss Berne! Mr. Ned, he already very mad to me. Oh, please let me save myse'f, Miss Berne. I will swear—"

It did not suit the Prowler's purposes to become involved with the great planter. He watched his moment. As Berne turned her eyes toward Borel, and the pistol carelessly toward the ground, the Prowler lifted his gun.

"Don't be frightened," he said with a laugh. "We won't hurt you. If you just keep right still, —with that hand where it is,—till we pull out o' this. Go 'long, Borel."

"Better wait, Borel," Berne said quietly. "You'll have to see Mr. Ned about this sooner or later, you know. I advise you to wait."

"Yes'm; I'll wait."

There was a sudden rustle in the thicket, coming closer; the sound of footsteps in the ooze; some one blundering through the morass.

Berne sighed with relief. Not like Mr. Ned to come in that fashion, to lose the way; but it must be he.

"Pull out, damn you! Pull like the devil!" the Prowler cried to Borel. Borel did not budge.

"Mr. Ned! Here! Here! Here!" Berne called. "This way, Mr. Ned. Be quick!"

There was no answer. The squashing, rustling steps seemed farther away.

Prowler dropped the gun in the boat, snatched the paddle from Borel. He did not believe this lady would really shoot. At any rate, it seemed the lesser danger.

"Mr. Ned!" cried Berne. "This way! Hurry! Hurry up! Oh, hurry!"

"Who wants help?—Coming!—Where are you? *Where?*" a voice was calling.

In duet with this voice, Berne, in order to guide her friend, who, she thought, was coming, and to hasten him, fired two sharp shots into the air.

A shriek arose from the distant underbrush, a horrible masculine scream of terror.

Berne tore through water and mud toward it, clambering over logs, dragging herself through the ooze, forgetful of the fast disappearing boat.

She heard deep, bass sobs close at hand. She

broke through the shrubs on a dry rise of ground.

There, on a lichen-covered log, in a natural garden-bed of swamp-lilies, sat Daniel Bardé rocking in agony, his face distorted, all the old nerve-wounds torn wide open by the sudden sound of a shot through that dead stillness.

Berne ran to him.

"*Gai-Da! Gai-Da!*" She put her arms about him, rocked with him, with the soothing rhythm of a mother. "Be still, *Gai-Da! Reste là!*"

Obediently he laid his head on her shoulder.

Berne pressed a comforting cheek on the brown hair. "It's all right, Da. It's quiet. It's calm. Peace, *cher* Da! All peace and rest. Be still."

Daniel closed his eyes. Little by little, the sobbing ceased. He rested in Berne's arms, still, long.

Then he lifted his hand to her cheek.

"Flame! O Flame!" said Dan Bardé.

"Hush, *Gai-Da!*" Berne whispered.

CHAPTER VI

BERNE MAKES A FRIEND

MR. LA GRANDE was walking through the small fig-grove on Ile Imaginaire, smoking his meerschaum, frowning at the condition of the trees.

An angry man came up to him.

"See here!" the Prowler began.

"Good morning," Mr. La Grande replied in mild rebuke, looked at the Prowler's hat.

"Mornin'!" dragging the hat off surlily. "Came to tell you I'm through. Done!"

"What do you mean? What's the matter?"

"I mean I'm off this deal. I'm through with it."

"But you can't do that!"

"Like hell I can't. What's to stop me?"

"Here! Sit down," seating himself at one end of a log and pointing to the other. He looked sick with apprehension, but spoke lightly. "Are you discouraged? Is that it? Is the place too hard to find? Is the map—wrong?" He lowered his voice to keep it steady.

"No. Guess I've got it located all right."

"Then, why?"

"It's a shame to throw away all that dough! But I ain't goin'-a stand for women buttin' in. Pointin' guns at me, and talking about the penitentiary like a judge!"

"Do you mean Miss La Grande? Tell me what you do mean. What happened?"

"I'm done. That's enough. I tried to talk about her keepin' her hands off before, and you treated me like I'd insulted the lady. So I ain't goin' to say any more. I'm just *through*!"

Mr. La Grande gazed on the ground; the Prowler cast an uneasy glance out of the corner of his shallow eye, pushed back his greasy hair, preparatory to replacing the hat on it, rose with decision. Mr. La Grande, against his will and nauseously against his taste, found himself pleading with this fellow to explain.

Prowler told him that he had not known that herons were protected by law; or at least,—in answer to a doubtful smile,—he thought he could get away with one or two, get the plumes for a lady. "You don't *need* to believe me," he said belligerently. He told what Berne had done, what she threatened. "So it's up to me to beat it. And that's that. Sorry. But—" he made a gesture of finality.

"You have taken a good deal of my money for this—enterprise," Mr. La Grande suggested.

"'Tain't *my* fault it's called off. The money's used."

"If you hadn't hunted herons,—had stuck to our purpose— See here; if what those documents say is true, don't you think you're rather a fool to go off half-cocked like this?"

Prowler smiled in his hand at Mr. La Grande's nervousness, his pliability and, as he had planned, soon left with a promise of protection against both neighbor and daughter.

"I should have taken Flame into my confidence at the start," her father thought. "Now, I fear, it will be difficult."

Poor gentleman! He was naturally an exquisite; the contact with this man hurt him; the whole business did. But he was poetical and soon dramatized himself to his comfort. He saw himself rather heroic, suffering for his family's good.

As he turned toward the house, a joyous barking broke forth all around it like an explosion of fire-crackers. Out of the shrubbery an airedale flashed, shouting with glee; the big hound chained to his kennel began to celebrate and to tug; from the rear of the house and around it a small, vibrant Scotch terrier flew toward the gate, and little black Beete, waving her arms and shrilling with delight, dropped out of a plum tree.

Mrs. La Grande was hurrying down the shell-lily walk.

"Hello! What's up?" Mr. La Grande went to the gate, too.

There, surrounded by two rapturous dogs, stood

what might, at first glance, seem to be a small postman,—a schoolboy in a blue-gray uniform.

Mr. La Grande started anxiously; then, seeing that the newcomer was sound and happy, his face cleared. He called out, "Why it's our young military academician! What brings you home, sonny?"

"Where's Sis? Oh, I'm all right!" kissing them. "It's just those darn measles broke out in school. —Oh, gee! Mater, don't be scared. I haven't got 'em. And I'm all doped up already; so *you* needn't. —It was day-scholars, o'course. None of us housemen. Darn nuisance, day-scholars! Always some-thin'!—"

"Please don't say 'darn,' dear."

"All right, Mater. Bringing in measles just when we had a game with Rugby 'Cad'my! Sending everybody home! I guess we won't go back now till after vacation. Where's Sis?"

His mother smiled at him reproachfully. "She'll be back soon. Sister first, still?" She had to flirt with every male, even her small son; but there was also a sting of sincerity in this.

"Aw, now, Mater!" squeezing her. Then, "May I telephone to Curéville, please'm? And tell the boys at Gertrude I'm here?"

"Right away?" his father laughed.

"Sure, Dad." Lad and dogs ran into the house from which could soon be heard the boyish tenor, eager, almost loud enough to be heard at Gertrude

Plantation without aid of the wires, Peter's father thought. "Is Karl home? Well, is Herbert? Oh, *aren't* they? Not even Leonard nor Bob? Gee! Well, then call *her*, please.—Hello, Motherlie! It's Pete. Yes'm; I'm home. Measles. Can the boys come over? Oh, no, ma'm! *I* haven't got 'em. Somebody at school. They sent us home. *Can* they? Oh, I'm all healthy,—honest! Will you send them over? Oh, thank you, Motherlie!" He came running back. "They can come. Guess I'll keep on my uniform till they do.—O Singsie, Beetee, Tiny, looky *he-re!*"

His mother detained him. "Do you call other boys' mothers 'Motherlie,' Peter?"

"No'm. *They* call her that."

"But you did."

"Well,—not exactly. O Beetee—" and he was off to the kitchen.

"He's the only one who looks like you, the only dark one," his mother said. "But I'm afraid he acts a lot like his sister."

"*Afraid*, dear?"

"Oh, you know what I mean! Don't take me up so. I mean so matter-of-fact. They're not affectionate, responsive, like Landry. They're a cool pair, those two. No temperament."

"Flame will be glad to see Peter," her father evaded the question.

He wished his daughter would come home. The interview was going to be difficult. Temperamental

or not, Flame was not going to be patient where the slaughter of protected birds seemed to threaten. The man was stupid, an idiot! To go involving himself in this! The main issue surely offered obstacles enough. Why had he wanted an egret? The childishness of the ignorant!—Of course, he assured himself, he was not really *afraid* of this talk with his little girl; but nevertheless he wanted her to come soon and have it over.

At the marge of the woods, Berne had held Dan's head on her steady shoulder until the silence and the cool breath of the forest restored him.

He was mortified, miserable at his weakness. This his return to his old playmate!

Dan's humor, never quite asleep, no matter how wretched he might be, made him grin wryly; he recognized that he had been half-consciously planning a rather neat little "approach" to Camille Berenicia, his babyhood sweetheart. And now he was being *nursed*. Ouch!

He lifted his head, tried not to look ashamed.

But Berne's quiet gaze, as impersonal as the woods themselves, lessened his embarrassment.

To Berne it was not a "situation"; he could see that. He was just a sick man who had needed her.

Berne spoke to him, at ease; "as if she were accustomed to finding yowling huskies in the brakes," he thought.

"You came out here alone, Da?"

"No. Uncle Douglas. I wanted to sit in the

woods alone. So he drove down the road to leave an order somewhere. I was waiting for him when I heard you call,—for help, I thought. You see,—a sudden shot,—shooting—affects me. I'm not usually— Sorry I made such a—"

"Please, Da! Of course, we all know; shell-shock. There are plenty others."

"Thanks. But—well! Sweet of you to call me 'Da,'—that old name."

"Things don't change much with us down here, you know."

"Oh, *don't* they? You've grown into a beauty, Flame. You were just a little red-headed monkey."

She laughed. He could see that her pleasure was for the old remembrance, not for the present compliment.

How his head swam! Dan was ill, and ashamed; but, after all, he was young, too. And here was a pretty girl rescuing him! He took the inevitable tone.

"Strange, our meeting here,—*this* way,—isn't it? After—" he began.

"My horse is out there," Berne said briskly. "I'll ride along and hurry up Uncle Douglas. Back right away."

"Queer girl!" Dan smiled. "Wouldn't improve the romantic occasion for a cent. Maybe that's why she's restful. Terrifyingly capable. You can see that. Wonder if she is cold.—Gosh! I'm horribly dizzy."

Cantering down the road, Berne lifted one hand from the reins and placed it on the shoulder where Dan's head had rested. Then she pressed its palm upon her lips, pressed them hard.

As she waited at the crossroads, looking for old Douglas, an automobile from Petite Anse overtook her.

Not Mr. Ned, however, but Martin Pinckney rode in it.

"Mornin', Miss Berne," said the negro driver. "Just been lookin' fo' you. Mister Ned was down to de city when yo' message done come and de sup'intendent just now got a-holdt of it and sont me chasin' to tell you. But when I got to de woods, warn't nobody dar but a gentleman sleepin' 'side a log."

"He's not sleeping. He is ill. It's Dan Bardé, Mr. Pinckney. He had a rather bad attack—"

"No! Let's go back there quickly, Tombo!" cried Martin.

When auto and horse had returned to Daniel, now standing, rather shakily, Berne reached him from her horse before Martin did from the car. Her solicitude was plain.

Martin made a mental picture of the Mater looking on complacently. "*Touché, madame!* I don't like it very well," he acknowledged.

"Too bad, old man!" he said to Dan.

"All right now, thank you, Pinckney." He was

glad Martin had not seen him making "a beastly spectacle" of himself.

"Mr. Bardé ought not ride back in that slow old buggy. It's getting very warm, and much of the road is unshaded. Can you take him to Curéville in the car, Tombo?" Berne asked. "I've only my horse."

"O Missy!" much troubled. "I's got orders to turn right on back along dis-hyere road home to Petite Anse, to git some guests and take 'em to New Iberia befo' train time."

"You'll have to take him with you to Petite Anse, then. I'll tell Douglas and telephone to the General. It's all right, Da," to his feeble protest. "They've known you at Petite Anse since the day you were born, and they'll want to have you. You simply *must*, Da. I'll be there this evening,—to see Mr. Ned."

Dan had not enough energy to resist. And the comfortable car did look more inviting just then than Uncle Douglas' buggy.

"I was going to get some one to give me a lift on to Curéville," said Martin Pinckney. "I'm lunching with the Droussards. Maybe Uncle Douglas will take me."

"Certainly he will. In with you, Da! Tombo has to hurry."

"Flame," said Dan for her private ear. "You *will* forgive my being such a nuisance,—so weak—"

"You're not a nuisance," she began. Then, looking in his eyes, Berne said a strange thing. "I forgive your weakness, of course. But, Dan Bardé, don't *you* forgive it!"

"Why,—Flame—"

"Please get in the car."

Dan almost saluted; jestingly, indeed, but something martial had stiffened him. He took orders like a soldier, was driven away, amused, a little resentful, stirred.

"I found a four-leaf clover this morning," Martin Pinckney was saying to Berenicia as they waited under the tree where her horse was tied. "And now this *tête-à-tête*! I'm a convert to signs, omens and predictions. You dislike compliments, Miss Berne? Or,—only mine?"

"Did I seem unappreciative? I'm sorry. I have a lot on my mind, Mr. Pinckney. I do like compliments and don't get many. That was a nice one. Thank you."

"You do carry a good deal, I'm afraid."

Berne looked up gratefully. Pinckney had dropped his lighter manner, was not playing with her now.

"Don't you ever want just to frivol? Doesn't seem right,—your working all the time."

"Because I'm a girl, I suppose? You work, you know, practically all the time; all men do. Lots of women do, too. No. I love the plantation. No man could like it better." She smiled.

Martin was startled. This child, with all the guards down, acting at ease with him, was lovely.

"But it does keep me from 'thinking pretty,' as Elodi calls it,—and sometimes from being sweet, I'm afraid. This is an apology, Mr. Pinckney. I know you thought me rude last night. Maybe I was. Mater said so." She blushed.

"That is very frank—and sweet, too," said Martin. "Next time I want to be friends and you *won't*, I'll try to remember. I'll say to myself, 'This isn't my personal unpopularity. She's only thinking of the rice crop.' "

He was returning to banter; but Berne would not. With boyish directness, she said, "Mr. Pinckney, I'd love to be friends,—if you meant that. Just as you're friends with Mr. Ned or Raoul Cantrelle. I'd *love* it."

It was his turn to blush.

"You mean—not flirt with you? Funny child!"

"I don't know how. That's true. And I don't want anybody to be—romantic, gallant, please. It embarrasses me. Mater thinks me queer for that and it makes us unhappy together. You say courtly things to me and I don't know how to receive them, because I can't tell how true they are. Then Mater is ashamed of me; it hurts her. But if you really want to be *friends*, Mr. Pinckney, I *can* do that. I admire you. I know you'd be a bully friend. And I'll try to be one, too."

She extended her hand. Martin gripped it. He

looked into her honest eyes, a little pleading now. He understood her, at last.

She needed friends,—he knew that better than she did. He would be a friend to her.

There was none like her, no young girl as frank as this to a man.

“I do understand,” he said. “I know what you want,—and what you don’t want, too. Let’s be friends, Berenicia.”

“Thank you, Martin.”

Whereupon, of course, he began to fall in love with her. Berne’s mother would have known the inevitability of that and laughed at her guileless daughter’s unconscious success.

Berne saw Uncle Douglas coming and went to meet him.

Meanwhile, Mr. La Grande was smoking too many pipefuls, as he sat in the living-room window hearkening for the hoof-beats of Berne’s horse; and his strange associate, the Prowler, had boarded a train.

He was going to New Iberia. He wanted to telephone by long distance and did not dare to do so from Curéville, too small, too neighborly and too near Imaginaire for secrecy.

From the larger town, he called two numbers in New Orleans. First, to a Northern guest in a fashionable hotel he said, “It’s all right, Boss. The feathers are there. No, sir; I can’t send you one

to prove quality. Tried it; but somebody's 'on'. You just got to trust me,—till the time."

Then, to a dark, outlawed bar-room in a dark outlawed alley he almost whispered, "Going fine! If the stuff's there; we'll get it. If it ain't,—there's still some juice in the boob. What say? Well,—the only 'out' is the girl. She's on to some-thin'. Sure,—a wise one. But—hell!—just a girl!"

Jogging lazily toward Curéville in the old buggy, Martin Pinckney watched Berne's horse disappear in the curve of Cherokee roses.

"The queer little thing does get to you; fact!" he was thinking. "Natural enough that her mother wants to place her well. Quite right! I could care for that youngster. Getting along,—be an old beau if I don't look out. No hurry, though. It's a risky business, marrying. By jove, I'll *be* her friend! If things do go to smash with them, wouldn't be a bad stunt to see them out of a hole by marrying Berenicia. Poor gentleman! And I like the child. If I could make her—! I'd have to do it all, though. Well,—maybe!"

In the pretty little plaza before the big red church in Curéville, Elodi, under her pink sunshade, met Odrasse Guidry tying his "blue" filly to a hitching-tree.

"*Bonjour!*" She smiled at him through her shadowy lashes. "What hast thou, Odrasse?"

What is the matter, my friend? You have the air very angry. Has Berenicia been mean to you, poor boy?"

He shrugged and, not very successfully, laughed. He yearned to chastise Elodi.

CHAPTER VII

PETER GOES HUNTING

PETER catapulted into Berne's arms as she came from the stables. He poured out to her all the excitements and trials of the short interval since they had met in the city, punctuating broken sentences by expressive gasps, in small-boy fashion.

"Why the grand red boots and the basket? Going somewhere?" Berne asked him.

"Yes'm. Hunting. With Karl and Herbert. I telephoned over to Gertrude and asked, and Motherlie let them drive over here. They're in the kitchen now, scrapping with Singsie. Singie's *insisting* on putting up sandwiches and the boys want us to eat what we hunt."

"Mater say you might hunt?"

"We-ell! Said we could *go* hunting,—if we didn't take along anything to shoot with. The boys' Motherlie said that, too. Ladies are so scary! But *that's* all right!" gallantly. "We can use sticks for frogs and set downfalls for rabbits. And Karl's got an old Confederate rifle,—just to carry. It doesn't go off any more; but we *had* to

have a gun to carry, 'cause Herbert'd told some fellers we were going hunting. And they'd see—"

"Oh, of *course*. Reckon you'd better let Singsie give you a few sandwiches anyway, hon. Might get hungry on the road," Berne suggested tactfully.

"Oh, she will, if she's set out to," Pete laughed. "And I told Karl, 'Never refuse eats!' That's my motto. Here they come, now."

They came in procession; two eager, wiry, good-looking boys from Gertrude Plantation and two little negroes,—a shiny, chubby one ironically called Shoestring and a shy, one-armed lad named President, with a crescent smile in a night-black face.

They carried staves, sacks and the antique rifle, and Shoestring had a "boat" of lard, already dripping, to cook with. Herbert bore, unwillingly, Singsie's donation of sandwiches, a concession to the fussiness of women.

Around them whirled a kaleidoscope of dogs; every boy had one, good or nondescript. Peter would have taken two; but poor Gamin, the terrier, had to be tied because he was a shepherd of chickens and must not learn to hunt.

"Shame not to take Gamin!" Peter sympathized with a distant whimper. "Isn't Shoestring's dog a wonder, Sis? He's a rabbit-hound."

Rabbit chasing is the ruin of the hunting dogs; but Berne tried not to laugh.

"Yas'm," said Shoestring proudly. "Only las' week he jumped a buzzard. He sho' did. Passes

me what dat dog kin do. He sho'ly jumped a buzzard. Old buzzard was sort o' asleep. He scurcely knowed what hit him."

"What's the breed? I've never seen quite—"

"Mist' Jonas say he's a pure— What's dat yo' Paw say, Karl?"

"Said he was a pure diversified mongrel," said Karl admiringly. "Daddy named him Melting Pot. But we don't care for that; we rather Terror. Growl, Terror! Show your teeth!"

Terror obligingly murmured and smiled; and the hunting party started.

Beetee came to the door, looked wistfully after them.

Seeing her, Shoestring strutted. "Go on in, gal. Go on in," he ordered grandly. "Dis hyere's a thoroughly he-male party. Pass in de house, Miss Lady. Pass on back in de house."

"Who you talkin' to, boy?" Beetee jeered after him. "Deliver yo'se'f to yo' equals. You can't talk high enough fo' me to git de sound o' yo' voice."

Berne was glad of the interlude of laughter. Now she stood in the waving shadow of the moss-draped live-oak, leaned against the tree, pressed against it as if to get in contact with its quiet strength.

The dread of an uncomfortable interview with her father, now became inevitable, of the *finesse* that would be necessary, stirred like a dark curtain back of her thoughts. But in the foreground of her

mind she was thinking, "He used to be full of fire, when he was little. Full of *power*. I remember. It must be there still, somewhere. Poor Da!"

The sudden moisture in her eyes astonished her. She did not realize how much she had wanted Dan Bardé, if ever he came back to Louisiana, to come back forceful, vibrant, a wise and sturdy friend for her. So she had dreamed him. Now she could not help contrasting his hand-clasp with the firmer one of Martin Pinckney; she hated to make that contrast.

"The boy's ill!" she rebuked herself angrily. "And he won the *Croix de Guerre*. Isn't *that* proof enough?" But somehow it was not.

"Thrilling news, Mater!" she called to her mother in the upper window, glad to have something gossipy to tell her. "Dan Bardé had a faint spell up the road. I found him and—"

"Oh, come up and tell me about it, dear!"

On her way to a good mother-and-daughter chatter, rare enough between these two who lived in different worlds, her father detained Berne, a hand on her arm.

"Soon, Commodore. Mater's waiting."

"Well, my dear, when you can! I want a long talk. If you will manage—"

"Yes; soon. Better lie down in the hammock a little. You look 'in,'—*dear* Commodore! Don't worry."

What had happened, she wondered; but suspected the Prowler's visit.

Mrs. La Grande's lavender boudoir, delicate and feminine as its occupant, curtained by vines and laces and gently pervaded by soft fragrances, seemed restful now.

But the Mater herself was quick with curiosity

Berne drove herself to talk as entertainingly as she could; beginning, of course, with her discovery of Dan ill in the woods, omitting the episode of the Prowler.

"Well you *have* had a romantic morning," her mother applauded. "Rescuing Dan and, then, an impromptu *tête-à-tête* with Martin. Rather a joke on you, miss; isn't it? You flee from drawing-rooms and meet swains on the highways. Two at once!"

"Three, if you like. Odrasse rode out with me."

"Oh, *he!* Is Dan as good-looking as they say? His father was superb. I never *liked* his mother; but she *is* pretty. Or was."

"Dan's good-looking."

"Don't stress the old friendship, the sisterly pose, too hard." Mrs. La Grande laughed.

"Why not?" Berne stiffened; then she relaxed, smiled, determined not to be on the defensive. Mater was as she was; what good fighting about it?

"I apologized to Mr. Pinckney for being ungracious to him last night," she said, hoping to please

her. "Told him you thought I'd been and that I was sorry."

"Camille Berenicia! You didn't!" an angry light in her eyes. "What taste,—to talk about *me!*"

"Why, Mater dear, I didn't do that!"

Injured silence.

"I thought you'd be pleased," said poor Berne.

"*Pleased?* To have you tell Martin Pinckney what I said to you? How sweet!"

Berne knew that this was not the true reason for her mother's chagrin. So, Berne-like, she said so.

"Mater, you know I didn't tell anything that was out of taste. What is the *real* trouble?"

"You'll never learn not to be a little fool—"

"Foolish to apologize if I was rude?"

Mrs. La Grande was exasperated. "Can't you make amends without *saying* so? A thousand ways!"

"No. I'm afraid not." Berne sighed. "I don't know any way but to be sorry and say so and try to look out next time. I'm not a natural social adept like you and Lanny, Mater dear." Her mother smiled, slightly placated, deciding to be pleasant. "I'm just a farmer, you know."

"Well! You're pretty this morning. Don't neglect to keep your hat on in this weather. 'Ware freckles! Speaking of Landry, my dear, do keep that impossible little country girl from getting silly about him."

"Elodi? 'Impossible'? Why, she's as well-bred and well-read as—"

"Matter of taste. Just don't ask her to come when Landry's here. We won't discuss it, please. Oh! I'm not afraid of anything *serious*, of course. But Lan has temperament." She did not say "my temperament," but her eyes said it for her. She shrugged. "And just now, when Helen Jeffrey is encouraging him again—"

"Is she? I'll not ask Elodi to call when he's here."

"Please don't. And, Camille Berenicia! *Pray* don't consider it your duty to tell Elodi or Landry what I've just said."

"*Mater!*"

Berne opened her eyes wide, caught her lip in her teeth. Then, after a still moment, she spoke placidly, "I'm going to Petite Anse this afternoon. They're sending the car for me."

"Fine! I'm glad to see—"

"Oh! It's business, dear."

"Of course," with a little sigh. "Well, wear something. Don't go in overalls."

"Will you choose the dress, Mater? I must go downstairs now. Loafed enough. Have to talk plantation with the Commodore."

"Don't wear him out. Look out! Don't rub off the powder. It's so hot!" as Berne kissed her.

As she went downstairs, Berne saw, through the rear door-window, a flock of grackles, gathering

their scattered clans, tuning up their little-violin voices, preening the half-hidden iridescence that the sunlight betrayed.

She lost her cares for that moment, watching the birds. "They always seem to lend me wings," she said to herself. "After all, there's nothing to be down about,—if the crop's good. And the market." She moved with lighter step.

Mr. La Grande called out, "How about the boat on the bayou, Flame? I can talk and rest, too, there. Just off our wharf. Under the pecan tree."

Berne waved assent, regarding her father as if she were his mother, went first to give orders to Uncle Hope.

That grizzled veteran was being scolded by Singsie.

"Be quiet, you!" she was saying. "You got to come pesterin', too. Ain't dat *hard*? Gwine git Missy all upsot. Dat's all what's missin' yet! Always makin' *traca*."

"I isn't makin' no trouble, at all. Woman, as de old folks' proverb say', 'Mosquito lose' his time when he try to sting de alligator.' Yo' words ain't havin' no effect on me.—Howdy, Missy! Missy,"—ignoring Singsie's menacing eye,—"howcome yo' Paw is tryin' to swap de good south corner of Savane Salée fo' dat worthless swamp on Guidry plantation?"

"You're *sure*, Uncle Hope?"

"Yas'm. Mist' Guidry's man, Jim, he told me so—on nigger gin. As de old folks' proverb say', 'Gin opens de mouth and lets de truth out.' "

"I'll ask my father."

"Looky how you done bothered Missy! She white as a egg," said Singsie reproachfully.

"Mighty sorry! Sho' is." He scratched his head, troubled. "But, as de old folks' proverb say', 'Take-care's worth mo' dan askin'-pardon.' I is just takin' care o' our good meadowland—"

Berne followed her father to the old blue boat tied beneath the pecan-tree, on the winding bayou far back of the house.

A tangle of wild-wistaria in bloom fringed the shrubbery behind him. The boat moved gently in the fleshy emerald leaves of hyacinth plants. On the high bluff across Vermilion's water,—tawny-blue in the shade, red-under-silver in the sun, mirroring white clouds and green foliage,—the white goats and white guinea-hens of a neighboring plantation were loafing under dense trees.

Berne drank in the beauty.

"We must never lose it!" she said to herself, the slogan she repeated a dozen times a day.

"Have you had luncheon, Flame? We missed you."

"Begged a bite down at the ferry. Commodore, it *would* be a joke if you began to be afraid of me. I'd think I'd grown up ugly, like the Hoodoo lady said I was going to."

"Why,—child! I suppose all parents get to fear children's judgments a little. Especially when—"

"What's the first thing on your mind, Father? I'll be an indulgent daughter." She tried to slacken the tension.

"Flame, dear, that man—"

"The Prowler, Beetee calls him—"

"Of course, you understand by now that I've had dealings with him. I did not intend to keep you in the dark long. Flame, do you remember the stories I used to tell you and Lan and Daniel Bardé, when you were little things,—about the Pirates of the Prairies?"

"Why, what on earth—"

"Never mind. Answer me. *Do you?*"

"Of course. About the terrible cattle bandits. And Da would say he wished they were here now, so he could join the Vigilantes and 'go for 'em.' But, Commodore,—"

"You think I'm changing the subject. I'm not. Tell me what you remember of those old tales."

Berne, amazed at him and wondering where the connection could be,—though she was accustomed to having her father put things in his way that was literary, dramatic,—dutifully recalled the story that had thrilled her childhood: How in the old Arcadian Acadian days when Canadian, French and Louisiana families lived in idyllic luxury under the chinaberry trees on the *îles* and *îlots* and flower-carpeted *savanes* of the Southwest Parishes,—by

day, the women singing at their looms, the men halloing to their prosperous herds on the fertile prairies, the darkeys happy at their labors in house or field, the fishermen and trappers making the bayou a ribbon of good-fellowship and liveliness; by night, ladies and swains riding out to the ball, under the starry skies,—how, then, there came, from dark cabins and huts and underworld haunts and unmentionable colonies, the Bandits of the Plains. How, like a little cloud growing into a hurricane, their evil deeds had grown. How judges, juries and lawyers had first condoned peccadilloes, then become feeble against crimes. How bribery and intimidation and every weakness and fear had rendered immunity, until the bandits had ridden and stolen and murdered and burned unscathed, waxing rich and corrupting youths of good families,—sometimes of the best,—until some of them became fascinating figures of horror, graceful reprobates. “Strutting in the marsh-thickets like purple gallinules,” Berne said. How, then, had arisen the gallant Vigilantes, the gentlemen’s army of righteousness, who had driven away the army of crime,—low and hideous or high and dashing, chiefs and gangs,—and, through danger and many sorrows, had cleared the islands and plains of the five parishes.

“And the prairie bandits often buried their loot, you remember, Flame, in *caches* in the Indian mounds and by the marshes, where, more than once,—the records tell us,—in burying their own,

they found old treasure buried years before by the Baratarian pirates."

"Commodore!" Berne gasped. "You're not—you can't be—looking for *buried treasure!*"

She felt almost hysterical, held her nerves with both hands. This would be too ridiculous to be borne. That money the plantation sorely needed,—he *couldn't* be wasting it on a treasure hunt; like a novel-reading urchin!

"Wait, Flame! Listen! Don't assume— What is it?"

She was hearkening, held up a hand for silence.

"Some one is there. I heard some one move in the bushes," she whispered.

"Can't be, dear. Perhaps a squirrel. Or a fish leaped."

After a moment, Berne said, "Let me look. I'm sure I heard—"

She found no one, but returned to the boat still not satisfied.

She was right. The youth, Borel, had come to Ile Imaginaire to beg leniency for his part of the morning's trouble. Barefooted, he had been prowling about the bayou's edge, getting up courage, had gradually approached these two in the boat, had lingered unobserved and listened. At Berne's first gesture of suspicion, he had swung his lithe body noiselessly into a tree.

He was in for it now. He had to be still—and to hear!

"Before you judge, child, let me tell you one more old tale," her father said, almost pleading.

Berne clasped her hands about her knees as if with a physical effort to hold herself together, pressed her lips into the line people called masculine, lifted her quiet, wide eyes to his, nodded.

"My uncle, Marcel Narcisse La Grande, my father's unmarried older and only brother—"

"Father dear," Berne interrupted huskily; she could stand it no longer. "I'm not judging. I'll promise not to form an opinion, if I can help it. But—just to relieve my suspense, if it's going to be a long tale—won't you tell me, please: *Are* you looking for *treasure*?"

Mr. La Grande's dark face lighted. The man in the tree held his breath, as, from an inner pocket, Berne's father drew a small volume of poems and, through a slit in the tufted cover, extracted a folded and discolored paper.

Oh! It was fantastic! She knew she must laugh soon; she must. But she kept her still eyes gravely upon him, as he whispered, tapping the paper with the stem of his pipe, "Not *hunting* treasure, daughter mine. I think—I've *found* it."

"Berne! Sis! Sis!" Peter's voice called. "Where are you? Singsie said—"

They looked up, saw Peter approaching. Then Berne got the chance to laugh that she needed.

Peter was coming slowly, a slow dog trailing behind him. The airedale was caked with bayou mud

and hated himself accordingly. Peter was a model for a fountain, wet and dripping; at every step spouts of water squirted upward from the tops of the high red boots. But his face was beaming.

"Why don't you empty the boots?" cried Berne, running towards him. "How did you get so wet?"

"No use. I'm so wet I'd fill 'em right up again. I got turned over in the bayou. Oh, only at the edge! We had a *fine* hunt and cooked our game—"

"Cooked *what*?"

"Why, Shoestring got a frog and we cooked his legs, and Pres had a bird—"

"What kind of bird? How did you get him?"

"I dunno what kind. Pres got him two or three days ago and saved him up. We brought him with us in a sack."

"Had the bird been kept on ice?" his father asked.

"Oh, no! But he was all right, sir; tasted fine."

"How did you cook the bird? In what? Did you skin the frog's legs?" Berne asked anxiously.

"No'm. Ought you to skin 'em? Well, they *tasted* all right. Cooked 'em in the lard. Oh! I know what you mean; we did forget to bring a skillet. But we found an old five-gallon syrup-tin in the swamp. It wasn't *much* rusty and we washed it good,—I mean *well*,—in the swamp water. We just fried 'em together,—the frog and the bird. Shoestring certainly *can* cook! And Karl divided everything equally. It was great!"

"Do you feel all right, son?"

"Fine, sir. 'Course! Only sort of hungry. Yes'm, Sis. I'll go take off my wet things, right off. But first, I want to show you what I found in our swamp. Looky here!"

He dug into his soggy pocket, extended his grimy palm. There lay a round black disk.

"Is it money?" Pete asked.

Mr. La Grande scraped its muddy surface with his knife.

He looked transfigured, as, without a word, he handed to his daughter an old American gold-piece that had been coined in 1854.

"Is it money?" Pete repeated. "*I said* it was. Herbert said, 'No.' Thinks he knows so much! Say! He said Brother Landry was in Curéville all this morning. I *told* him he'd gone to the city. And, Sis! May I go with Karl and Uncle Brazile and Alligator-man tomorrow, 'way out in the woods? They promised to take us. We want to play pirates. Brazile knows some bully places for burying treasure,—” His voice trailed off as he went toward the house.

"In our swamp!" said his father, regarding the coin.

CHAPTER VIII

MARCEL NARCISSE AND HIS SHADOW

BOREL had made his escape during the interlude of Peter's return.

He chuckled at the luck that had given him this valuable information and swore at the Prowler for having deceived him.

"Come sit at my gallery tellin' me lies! He make like he intend to grab him some money sellin' swamp land to Yankees for plantations. *Trésor; hien?* Brigands; eh-he? Borel, *mon fils*, you goin' find yo'se'f pretty rich!" He hurried away to blackmail his employer, the Prowler.

Berne's father in the blue boat, the consciousness of the old coin in his hand making a hectic fleck in each sallow cheek, went on with his story.

"My uncle,—your granduncle,—Marcel Narcisse, was a youth of great promise and astonishing beauty. My father was a boy,—about twelve, I think,—when my Uncle Marcel died; but I've often heard your grandfather speak of this older brother with the feeling we keep for the idolatries of childhood. He was by all accounts a romantic figure. Men clustered about him, and women,—why, before he was nineteen—but that's not material now.

"He had an adoring comrade, a sort of 'faithful Achates,'—an uncle of Mme. Guidry, greatuncle of our Odrasse. People called them Marcel and *Ombre de Marcel*. Marcel and his shadow! How true in the end!" He paused.

"These youngsters,—for neither lad had really reached manhood,—fell into dangerous pastimes. For sheer spice of adventure, probably, they became intimate with the Laconture gang of bandits. The boys never *stole*, of course; but the banditti offered many other wild escapades. Soon they found themselves entangled, the conscious-stricken recipients of intolerable secrets.

"Finally *Ombre*, as they called him, in debt to these men for gambling and for graver follies, was trapped into participation in a raid. That gave the rascals complete hold upon him. He did not dare confess even to Marcel.

"The Vigilantes were just organizing. They naturally expected that these adventurous youths of good family would join them in driving out brigands. Many eyes, already suspicious of them, were watching to see what they'd do.

"Just then a hunted bandit, to whom he was in debt, came to *Ombre*, threatened the poor lad with exposure, forced him to take charge of a case of stolen goods. Money and jewels, largely. *Ombre* concealed it in his home. Next day the bandit was arrested, and, according to Vigilante code, beaten and banished. He went to Texas but sent threats

to *Ombre*, ordering him to keep the loot safe for him.

Imagine poor *Ombre's* sensation when he opened the box and found the contents had all been stolen from Marcel's father,—my grandfather!

"Of course, his first thought was to return the property; but how could he do so without disgracing his family by betraying his nefarious connection? And he knew that even if he found a way, others would betray him in revenge. He was already being forced to pay tribute, to send money to Texas.

"The distracted boy buried the valuables on the borders between our land and theirs, made a clear map of its location and enclosed it in a wild letter to Marcel. He confessed everything but begged his friend to tell the world that he, *Ombre*, had been disappointed in love. For he meant to shoot himself, to be dead when Marcel should receive the letter. He asked his friend to be discreet, to 'discover' the treasure at the proper time.

"He entrusted his letter to another young fellow, bade him deliver it to Marcel next day.

"Then sentiment, always the peril of us romantics,"—Mr. La Grande smiled,—"spoiled his plan. He gave himself the melancholy pleasure of a last day on the water with his friend. He and Marcel went out on Vermilion Bay for one of the long, lonely sails they so enjoyed together. A sudden fierce storm arose. Both boys, our Uncle Marcel Narcisse and his Shadow, were drowned.

"The lad who had *Ombre's* papers for Marcel knew enough of the boys' wild conduct to feel pretty sure that the contents were better left unknown to their families. He had too much honor to read the papers,—the seals were unbroken to this year. Yet he was afraid they might be demanded of him by some one and did not dare destroy them. He hid them away.

"When they were found and read—"

"How? When? By whom, Commodore?"

"Just a minute! So, in this place, *chérie*, is the end of all our cares. Somewhere on this place. A miracle!"

"Dear father—who told you this story?"

"You don't believe in it,—even with *this* in my hand?"

"O Commodore, of course we know that the bandits buried treasure-cases, just as the pirates and Lafitte's men used to do, and that these have sometimes been found. Even old coins of Lafitte's men have, for that matter. Odrasse himself has a Spanish doubloon and an antique American piece."

"Well, then—"

"But, *darling!*" Then she controlled herself. "Mind telling me how you found out all about it and what you've done, Commodore?"

The Prowler, he told her, a stray laborer, rather better educated than most, a floater, had drifted into the parish.

"To scout for herons?" interrupted Berne.

By no means, her father assured her. He had been employed in tearing down an old homestead, one of the old frame houses with front façade of brick and plaster.

Buried in the bricks, he had found these ancient papers, *Ombre's* tragic letter and the map. There they lay where the lad to whom they had been entrusted had hidden them,—as his faded notation on the wrapper showed,—in the walls of his room, on the day he decided to join Beauregard's army.

He never reached home alive.

"The letter was probably in French?" Berne asked.

"How keen you are, child!" Yes; in French, and, as she supposed, Prowler could not read the papers. But he could read the name, *La Grande*, and *Ombre's* name and knew enough about the neighbourhood to be familiar with them and to recognize certain landmarks on the map. He took his "find" to New Orleans to be translated by a Créole crony, then brought the papers to her father.

"You *bought* these papers?"

"The letter. The map he will not sell; and—ah! —insists on sharing somewhat in what we find. My dear, it is a *large* amount. An actual treasure. And there is a passage in the letter which seems to indicate,—but this, I fear, you will never believe,—that in the place where *Ombre* buried the loot, some of the Baratarians already— Well! Even if not!"

"Of course, they would both really *belong* to us,

—a letter to Great-uncle Marcel and a map about buried loot, stolen from us, treasure on our land—” Berne began.

“No way to make him give up the map, without,—ah!—great publicity. He has it well concealed. And people would think me absurd,—even you did, my dear!—until I succeed. Secrecy is so necessary. What a stampede into the swamp if it ever were rumored! I was not imposed upon. I made him give me a copy of the map; not complete in detail, to be sure. But I knew that matters little; it can no longer be definite. With the frequent hurricanes and floods on our coast, contours change and slip. And in all these years! It takes time to locate the spot.”

“You are financing the—adventure?”

“Oh, of course. Had to. He had to hire a surveyor who could be trusted,—and not inquire too far,—and other assistants. And, naturally, I had to supply this man’s needs and buy him a good boat and—materials. It has taken longer than we thought. And he is not economical.” He sighed.

“But he *is* cautious. And we are near the end.”

“Did you sell—land, dear? I heard—”

“Only a little piece and exchanged a little piece.”

“Of South Field and of, of—Savane Salée, Commodore?” There was a break in the cool young voice.

“Just a strip, my dear. I needed some of the Guidry woods—”

"My good fertile field and meadow land!"

"But, child, I had to restore our old boundaries. He thinks—"

Berne rose to her feet, flaming.

"Father! You've bought the Guidry part of our heronry! Turned that man loose in it! That man is hunting *plumes!*"

"No. No. No. Listen, dear! I know what happened this morning. Too bad! But you're wrong. He swears he'll not shoot a bird again. I assure you, my dear, it's not the heronry he wants in that strip. It's the Pool of the Moon," he whispered.

"But he did include the Guidry side of the heronry? And that is some distance from the Pool of the Moon. Oh! Odrasse will be so sorry his father sold it! I'll watch."

"No! daughter. I cannot have the man interfered with. You must not."

"I'll watch," said Berne, her chin firm. "Commodore, I'll not interfere with your plans, though I—well! But I'll watch those birds. So tell him."

Mr. La Grande was troubled.

"Well, not *apparently*, dear. Please! And no need to tell Ned,—about this morning."

"Why don't you speak to Mr. Ned or Judge Julien Le Boeuf, dear, about the whole thing? They'd never tell and—"

"You think my own judgment not sufficient, daughter?" There were tears in his eyes, the hurt

of his half-acknowledged inefficiency; the hope and buoyancy had gone out of his voice.

"Daddy dear!" Berne said remorsefully, sitting beside him, her arm about his shoulders. "Of course, you know what to do. I'm horrid to kill the fires. Look up yonder in the window!" Peter stood there in his underclothes, eating corn-bread and molasses. "He wants to go to Agricultural College. He wants to be a planter. It's going to be *his* Ile Imaginaire. He's growing up to love it. We'll save it for him; won't we,—you and I?"

"O Si-is!" Peter chanted. "Mater says better come get *ready*, if your going to Petite *Anse*. What time's the car *coming*? Beetee's got your bath all *ready*. Mater's got your *dress* out."

No one seeing Berne going in the car to Petite Anse shortly after could have doubted the Mater's superior ability to bring out her daughter's attractions. The cool frock of pale-green silk-muslin emphasized the ivory pallor of her throat and arms; the gorgeous oriflamme of her hair was softened forward, waving about her face, making a frame for its delicate strength; her steady, ruddy-gold-brown eyes were deepened under the tender shadows of a lacey hat.

"Gee! You look pretty, Sis!" Pete had vouchsafed as he kissed her good-by. "If you give me a spoon I'll eat you."

"You've eaten enough strange creatures for one day, sir," Berne replied. "But I do feel a very fine

lady." Then, a little wistfully, "Like me better dolled up, Peterkin?"

He wrinkled his forehead in masculine dilemma between the truthful and the tactful. "No-o," he said at last. "Straight goods, I don't. It's awful pretty. But I kind o' like you better just plain."

Berne glowed at him and Peter sighed in relief. You never could tell about ladies; he decided "straight goods" was best.

When Berne reached the beautiful "island" of Petite Anse, set so high in the broad, flat, misty-blue prairies and fields and coastal marshes that, from its terraced slopes, one seemed to be standing on a star surveying a stretch of evening firmament, she left the car at the great gate. She wanted the beauty of the walk through the myrtle-flanked path, under the tremendous arms of ancient oaks that waved moss-banners at her approach, through whispering dark tents of the bamboo grove, by many-flowered gardens and then to the vine-covered home on the top of terrace-steps, where giant trees stood as guardian pages.

She loved to look over the swamp lake where the herons lived, a few now, like great flowers, blue and white, blooming on the trees.

She loved the blue haze, as blue as sapphire, that hung over the forest reaches of the game preserve, the blue pools like living enamel set with brilliant water-fowl, and the clouds of little land birds that whirled above this paradise.

But most of all today, she regarded the plantation itself,—its well-kept and well-planted arpents, the staple and expected crops and the exotic gaiety of its up-pushing pepper-fields, darkly shining orange groves, brilliant orchards of pomegranates and prospering nurseries of avocados.

She delighted in the humming of its bees and tiniest jeweled birds in the multitudes of roses, and, behind this murmur, like the sea behind the rain, the distant voices of hundreds of hens and their broodlings.

Would *Ile Imaginaire* ever fulfil itself like this? This was what Louisiana meant! Her beauty in fruitage.

In the doorway, under the purple and gold canopy of the bignonia vines, Dan Bardé was waiting for her.

He greeted her with the naturalness she liked.

“ ‘Lo, Flame!” he said. “I died and woke up in Heaven. Isn’t this—” he had no words.

“Oh, yes! It’s the best we do. Feeling better?”

“Prime. Pinckney’s been looking after me like a mother, and now that the family’s home,—but you know ‘em! Wait a minute, Flame; will you? Let’s get acquainted a little bit before you go in.”

They sat on the settee under the vines.

“I saw you coming and ‘laid’ for you,” said Dan. “You looked like a water-lily coming up the walk, all green-and-white. Pretty, Flame!” He was

talking as he used to talk before the War, had forgotten about himself.

"Thanks, Da. I strive to please today. It's the frock and hat."

"Let me look at you. Do you know, the only thing I remember that hasn't changed, that's just as I remember it, is—"

"Hair!" Berne said. "My *panache*, like Henry of Navarre. Only his was white."

"No'm. I wasn't going to say that. It *has* changed, from red to glorious."

"Must we check up my points?"

"Yes'm. Polite to let me finish. It's your hands, Flame. Honestly, I've seen them all my life. And felt them."

He extended his and, simply, Berne put her hands into them; a dart of color flew into her cheeks.

"Yes, Flame. Just like that." He nodded gravely. "Firm and soft and light and vibrant. Isn't it queer I remembered?"

Berne had no answer at first, then she said, "Maybe it's because we used to walk hand in hand when we were little. Except when I was scratching and throwing. Did you remember *that* about them, too?"

"What did you remember about me? Come, now,—anything?"

"Everything."

He bowed, touched.

"But *most*?"

"I'll tell you, then. The *power* of you. The vigor."

A silence fell. Then, slowly, the old languor in his voice, he said, "I'm afraid I've forgotten that myself."

"Let's remember it, Da." She gripped the hands she held.

"Together, Flame? I'll—try," but doubtfully. She rose to enter the house.

"Show me where you live," he said as he followed. "Can we see Ile Imaginaire from here? That direction?"

"No. There. But it's far. You can't *see* it. In *that* direction!"

"Over there, under that shadow?"

Berne's heart had been flying fast and happily; now it fell like a hurt bird.

"Yes," she said to Dan. "Under the shadow." And, to herself, she added, "Under the Shadow, today, of Marcel Narcisse."

CHAPTER IX

NESTS

WHILE Berne and Daniel were crossing the living-room and rounding the long "gallery," she could not help hearing a voice out there, Mme. Boutin's, saying, "Oh, *Oui*, my friends! Landry La Grande has become very *épris* with my little niece, Elodi Huval. Again this morning, he must pass to her house in Curéville, and miss his train to the city. I see them picking Japan plum',—not quite ripe ones; but youth and romance can digest everything." She jingled. "Eh? I have told her, 'Hold on tight that small head with the both hands. He is like summer lightning, that young man. Maybe the sky blaze' up, but he strikes nothing. Pouf! All gone!' I very regret, me, that that nice boy, Odrasse— Ah! *Voici* Camille Berenicia!"

"I've sent for your duds, Berne. You're going to stay over night. Oh, yes; you are! All arranged by telephone with your Mater," said her hostess, a little lady of soft curves and dimples, with a flying laugh after each phrase. "Sorry the girls are away. But I've got Mme. Boutin and

Ellen and Dan to play with you,—and Martin, that hardy perennial. Is that *good*, Martin?" She laughed teasingly at Pinckney through the smoke of her cigarette, curled up in a big fan-backed chair, looking, Dan thought, like a pretty incense-burner in a shrine-niche. But this lady was no mere ornament; her gay graces covered executive ability that directed a large *ménage* and many retainers, with masterful ease.

Ellen Droussard moved over on the settee to make room for her friend.

"Relax, child," her hostess rose and placed a cobalt blue pillow back of Berne's head, so that Martin Pinckney could get the best effect of her gorgeous hair and fine profile.

Ellen Droussard grinned and winked at her; Mrs. Ned winked back unashamed. She was openly trying to make this match; thought it would be good for them both. Berne's lack of self-consciousness made her laugh. "That child is about as coquettish as a farm tractor," she said softly to Ellen.

Dan had drawn his chair close to Berne. "Nice of you to come visit while I'm here. I may assume that much?"

"Sorry, Da; I'm afraid not."

Rather dull of her to be so literal, he thought. But Martin Pinckney smiled, he was understanding her now. The child was utterly true.

"I came to see Mr. Ned," Berne explained.

"Too bad he's still away. I need some advice about fertilizers."

Looking at the picture she made against the blue cushion, "Fertilizers!" the men exclaimed in unison and exchanged amused glances.

But Martin was thinking how good it would be to release Berne's wide, still eyes,—let them cry, if they wanted to; to make her firm lips soften, curve upward.

"You are quite better, now?" Berne was asking Daniel.

"Oh, yes. Flame," he added in a lower tone. "Please don't think I'm paying compliments,—but I seem to get strength from you, to feel better when you're near. Even on the train—"

"That's good. I used to feel so about you when we were children. I used to say, 'Da'll take up for me. It will be all right when *Gai-Da* comes.' "

"You were going to tell us about your profession; is it no?" Mme. Boutin reminded him with frank curiosity. People down there feel they have a right to know about their neighbors.

"Accent on the first two syllables," Daniel said. "I *profess* to be a mining engineer, but—" he shrugged.

"The War came?" Ellen Droussard suggested.

"It came, to be sure. But it didn't interrupt anything. I went out to the mines just after my graduation, but my mother was horribly lonely in New York. So, of course, I came home again."

"Of course," said Mme. Boutin with secret significance.

"Then I became a consultant. But as it takes two to make a consultation, I just played about—waiting for the other fellow."

They laughed, but an undercurrent made Dan feel on the defensive. He wanted to remind these people that many of his circle merely played.

"But you're very young. You can still work yet," Mme. Boutin apologized for him.

"Heavens! Let the boy rest! He worked enough in the War to deserve an indefinite vacation, if half we hear is true," Ellen Droussard said, but Dan felt apology in her tact, too.

Mrs. Ned merrily interposed new topics; under the cover of them Berne said to him, "Poor Da! It's horrible to love a thing and not be able to do it."

Dan blushed. "I—I'm afraid I don't grieve much about it," his honesty made him say. "I'm a drifting—oh, I did like my job, of course! You have interesting salt mines here, I'm told. I must visit them,—later on."

The afternoon was changing into gold and saffron. Berne sat erect, listening, restless.

Her hostess laughed. "Run along, Berenicia. You may go into the heronry. The birds are coming home for the night, and Berne *has* to see them," she explained. "Want to go with her, Martin? Dan?"

Martin did want to, but he saw through Mrs. Ned and sacrificed his desire for the fun of defeating hers; let Dan and Berne go without him.

"You're well enough to come, Da? It's worth while."

Then Dan astonished himself. "Of course, I am," he said.

They crossed the wide lawn toward the heron lake.

This had once been a little marsh tangle, where for many years no herons lived. For the plume-hunters, long unrestrained, had exterminated them from their South Coast homes, slaughtered them to trim hats with, Berne told Dan, slaughtered and tortured and starved these beautiful beings "to make women look pretty. Such women! I'd rather see horns growing on their heads," she flashed, "than aigrettes!"

This was the first fire of the old Flame he had seen, Dan thought.

"But Mr. Ned patiently tempted the herons back to Petite Anse, made this home for them, taught them confidence. And now we have good laws that try to protect our birds. I'm starting a heronry, too,—Odrasse Guidry and I,—on the borders of our lands." She stopped with a pang, remembered it was no longer on Odrasse's father's land. Poor Odrasse would be so hurt! "We haven't as many birds as these, of course. But we're doing our best to follow Mr. Ned."

"Our host is a great man, I'm beginning to think."

"He's a great gentleman. Nothing is too weak for his protection,—not even beauty." The sudden light in her eyes startled him.

"And our Odrasse Guidry will be like him?" Dan remembered the scene on the road in the morning.

"He wants to be. I hope he may."

"I hope so, too, then," gravely.

"Oh! Not *that*. What made you think it?"

"Sure, Flame?"

"Certainly."

She did not resent his asking; she lived in a land of frankness.

Dan thought, "Why the dickens should I be glad? Dog in the manger! I must not flirt with Flame. She's not used to it."

"Here we are. I'd better lead you." She gave him her hand. "Silence, now. Very still!"

Still holding his with the hand he had remembered, she led him over a plank across a marsh-bed of Lotus-of-the-Nile. The drops of water hung on the lotus-leaves like beads, and around their stalks the frogs snored comfortably.

Where the plank-bridge reached into a thicket of small trees at the edge of the swamp-lake, Dan gave an involuntary cry. On all sides in the branches lay the great nests of twigs,—a bird's neck-length apart,—hundreds of them; and in

every nest the great turquoise and aquamarine eggs clustered like Aladdin's jewels.

Dan had to bend low to avoid hitting the nests, as he approached the platform camouflaged by leafy branches of the thicket. There they waited, as in a nest themselves.

Somewhere in the low bushes and water-grasses, a hidden purple gallinule, as if conscious of his concealed glory, laughed a contralto, "La, la, la, la, la!" And from the shoreward reeds, an epauletted blackbird called out sharp and sweet, "Liquidee-ee," his comment on the evening.

The little blue herons in their wonderful slaty coats, exotic dark blue, flashed with glints of steel and garnet, preened themselves on the tips of low trees. Some Louisiana-herons that looked like stately little gentlemen of the old *régime* in old-fashioned brownish hats and Confederate gray suits with white waistcoats and puffy dark cravats, leapt up straight in the air, legs dangling for short flights. Others nervously craned their flexile necks and ruffled their neck feathers, alert, sensing strange visitants. Single birds, high in the sky, folded their wings and parachuted down to the trees.

In the open reaches of the pond, many-colored wild-ducks glided, splashing down to the water like festive hydroplanes.

Little *cap-caps-dorées*, the least bitterns, on the low growths above the brilliant green circles of the water-penny leaves, were still as if, in their golden

brown and vivid onyx, they were painted there,—as indeed they were, their backs glistening under the long brushes of the sunset.

Then high in the cerulean air, they came,—the snowy herons,—flotillas and single sails, gathering like a fairy fleet, purest white or tinged with evening light, sailing, sailing on the blue sky-sea in a lyric, measured flight; every dip and rise and turn as rhythmic as a song. Nearer and nearer. Dan caught his breath with rapture. He could see their wispy, curving plumes vibrating with the motion and the light.

By hundreds and thousands the ethereal creatures hung above the dark trees, floated over the open spaces, glimmered pearl against carmined white clouds or white against the sky.

Then, like an arrow to its mark, each bird dropped from the blue, straight to its own nest.

The bird city was inhabited. The evening was filled with the excited voices of home-comers.

The voices grew quieter and quieter, suddenly were hushed. The long light deepened and darkened.

Dan turned an enraptured face.

“Yes,” Berne dared to whisper. “It is what life is for,—to keep nests safe.”

When they had crossed to shore again and stood in the bamboo thicket, Dan asked her to explain what she said.

“I meant all nests,—human, too. Isn’t that what

it's all for? Everything. Isn't that what you fought for, Da? What people work for? What men and women stay—right—for? To keep the nests safe?"

"Why, what a philosopher, Flame!"

"Make fun of me if you want to. But, you see, the plantations are my *alma mater*. So my philosophy is bucolic. But *isn't* it wonderful to be useful like Mr. Ned, even to the birds?"

"Must be. You're a tremendously useful member of society yourself; aren't you? My grandfather says you're the big chief, a 'regular feller' on the plantation—"

She laughed with him at his free translation of General Bardé. This was like old times. Dan had always made her laugh.

"Commodore—my father's the boss. But I do have to run Ile Imaginaire; he's not very well. Don't let General Bardé make you think it's too much for me, though. He is so kind! He's been my champion ever since I was little; and worries about me, I'm afraid, though there's no reason."

"Men can't get used to the idea of a girl's doing work out under the sky, I suppose," Dan grinned. "Indoors, we can bear it. I knew a Connecticut farmer who was outraged by a picture of a French peasant lass at the plow. But his own wife is fairly parboiled in family-laundry-water. But, you, little Flame,—you *like* such a hard job, Miss Superintendent?"

"When things go well. Don't you, too, *really*? No fooling!"

"'No fooling!' You *used* to say that. Do I like hard work? Can't answer that. I'm like the man who said he didn't know whether he could play the violin or not; he'd never tried."

"Why didn't you ever try?"

"Never learned how. Brought up trivial. I haven't been out of college many years. And mother likes me to tote her around,—and one thing happens after another. And the War took time. Oh! I do take a spurt at things once in awhile; but I'm an idle fellow, I guess, and only work when I play."

She was silent.

"The Lady disapproves. Tell me what's the matter with me, little philosopher."

"I don't know, Da. But I know, when *I* get limp, what I think about."

"Gosh!" Dan started resentfully. "She considers me *limp*!" he thought. Then he laughed good-humoredly and asked, "What do you think about? Do tell me what makes maidens stiff."

She returned his laugh but continued seriously. "I remember what a Hoodoo woman who lived in our woods used to tell us. She said every one had a *flame within* which must be given room to burn. Passages of expression, I suppose she meant. Or it smolders backward, using a man up, instead of turning him into light and power. Some people let

it go too far,—don't control it. It burns them to cinders. I might have come to grief like that, if I hadn't—hit you with an oyster shell."

"Why, Flame!"

He reached up and lifted the lock on his forehead, smiling.

"Yes; there it is!" she said. "That scar cured me. That very day I began to control my temper. I certainly am endowed with one, as Uncle Hope says. I was so frightened, Da! It was terrible to have hurt you."

"You were a dear little thing to have felt it like that.—They called *you* Flame."

"But that was because of hair—and temper; not for the flame within."

"You've got it, though,—one can see. That's what I shall mean when I call you Flame. Mme. Boutin says it's *verboden* now. But mayn't I,—if I promise not to mean hair,—and temper?"

"I want you to."

He was beginning to look tired; one of his sudden languors swept over him. She saw it drag the humorous twinkle from his eyes.

"Best go in now," she began.

He saw her solicitude.

"Yes. Oh! I need my flame renewed, I'm afraid. It's quite burned out. All gone. There isn't any more. I must find me some kindling." He laughed.

The last light fell on Berne's head, turning it

suddenly into fire. The golden-ruddy lights glowed in her quiet eyes.

Something leapt in Dan's heart. Impulsively he put out both his hands and held her face between them. He bent toward her, then drew quickly back, dropped his hands, startled at his own impulse, stared at her.

"Flame!"

"Let's go in now," Berne said. "They'll be waiting."

He followed her. The twilight fell. Nature and night were taking charge of the nesting.

General Bardé had come and brought a letter for his grandson.

Dan read it under the lamp in the living-room, before joining the others on the "gallery."

His mother was missing him horribly, it said, in spite of many activities. He was to watch his susceptibility, she warned him; there were dangers in the backwoods as well as in the city, and ambitious mothers everywhere. Dan must remember his promise not to desert her—not for years and years. She had loaned him to his country; but no girl must get him yet. She'd stuck by him, she reminded him playfully,—but he knew it was true and that she meant to remind him of it,—amid hordes of suitors. Well, then. On guard!

Daniel laughed indulgently. He knew he was not susceptible. That was a pretty pose of his mother's. But her warning had not come at an in-

appropriate moment, he confessed to himself. Of course, she was right. He must not let this singular girl "get to him." It would never do.

What would never do?

He flushed, asking himself the question. He realized that suddenly he was avoiding an emotion, instead of seeking one as he had been doing for so long.

Was he coming alive at last?

That was it. He must not confuse his reactions, must not exaggerate them. It was good to be coming alive, alight.

A sleepy sound came from the throat of some land-bird in his nest, a comfortable, tender, home-like sound.

Suddenly Dan felt cold.

He went to the "gallery" and sat there close to Flame.

CHAPTER X

ELODI AND LANDRY

LONG years ago, when a pioneer priest from France built a crude church at the fairest curve of Bayou Vermilion,—as if to beard the wood-gods in their stronghold,—he must have learned to found a town through having meditated so earnestly upon the charms of the Heavenly City.

Today's big red church in Curéville, descendant of that one built in the wilds, commands a hamlet of spacious homes, spreading broad wings in nests of trees and flowers. Their gardens are fruitful. The truck-fields overflow. Fishermen sail up the bayou delivering newly-taken Gulf fish from their boats to one's ice-chest; fresh-water fish frisk in every stream. Never were eggs richer, cream more frothy than here. The forests afford game, from rabbit to deer and bear.

Whites and negroes live and work in amity.

The red church looks down upon perfect hospitality unconscious of itself, upon a cultivation without a pose and homes ruled by the heart. There is music in every household; nearly every one can dance. What books are read are of the best; two languages are spoken.

What wonder Elodi Huval was sweet? She was born and spent her days in the shadow of the old church, in the homes of the old town,—all as her own to her.

She had never looked into a face that did not smile response. She had never known a soul who did not love her.

Gay as a moth on a summer morning, she had had innocent affairs of the heart since she could toddle. Though she remembered her fourth birthday, she could not recall a time without its little lover. But she was almost sex-unconscious still; it was romance that intrigued her. She saw herself as the heroine of an old novel, besought by many cavaliers of whom she was now the capricious tormentor, now the gracious, guiding angel.

There had been a recurrent *motif* of Odrasse Guidry. She and Odrasse came together and drew apart to others, like partners in a quadrille.

Landry had always thrilled her imagination when he came from the city; but he had seemed many years her senior with no relation to herself, until the humor took him to attend one of the Saturday-night country balls; and there he had seen his sister's little friend in a new aspect. Two boys were fighting about her. She was the belle. Because others wanted her favor, Landry selected her and took it. He continued to see her because she was so sweet. He never gave the lightest thought as to how his

attentions would seem to Elodi. He liked to play with her, so he played.

When she met Odrasse in the little plaza that morning, she had just accompanied Landry to his train. She was still thinking about the wayside Mexican primrose she had plucked, of how Landry had taken it from her hand, held its silky pinkness against her cheek under the pink sunshade, smiled and put the flower in his coat.

She was sorry she had teased Odrasse about Berne, for she saw that he was really troubled.

"Don't be mad to me, Toto," she said,—this is the land of nicknames. "I never wanted to make you sorry. I just was trying to make you laugh, Toto."

He smiled at her. A tease, but she *was* sweet. He wanted to know why she was "down town" in the heat of the day. She blushed and told him. The blush disturbed Odrasse. He could not imagine anything more horrid than that anybody should hurt Elodi as Berne was hurting him.

"Will you go in our boat to the picnic at Caissons', Dodi? I'd be glad."

But she wasn't going to the picnic. Landry was to be at Imaginaire over that Saturday; she had promised to be home if he stopped in Curéville on the way.

"Wish I had Landry's ways," Odrasse ventured a hint. "Maybe *all* the ladies would like me, too.

They say, in the city, he's just like you, Dodi. Flits from flower to flower."

He thought he had been astute; he could see that she lost color for a moment.

But, naturally, thought Elodi, as she went home, Landry would be popular in the city. That made it all the more wonderful! He never would miss trains like that, come so often, unless—

In the lane where she had picked the Mexican primrose, she stooped for another, fastened it in her belt.

Meanwhile the primrose in Landry's coat had faded quickly, as they do, and he had thrown it out of the window.

He opened a New Orleans newspaper he had bought at the station; turned to the stock reports.

He opened the paper with the rather mature, indifferent, leisurely air that many thought intriguing in young Landry; but when he found what he sought he became, in an instant, just a badly frightened boy.

He turned chalk-white; his teeth chattered.

Almost his first thought was for his mother's disappointment; let us say that much for Landry. She would think he was a visionary like his father; a thing she always feared. He had not told her he was speculating, heavily for him, on what had seemed to him an infallible piece of information. He had tacitly promised not to speculate for himself, when they bought him his seat on the Exchange.

He'd been so proud of his seat,—the youngest member! Now, he suddenly faced failure, the loss of that cherished membership.

He'd already drained the plantation dry. God! Why was this such an off year? They might have sold the place. Well, Camille would have *had* to; that's all. But, now!

Landry was spoiled; always got what he wanted. It was easy for him to ask for gifts; but he had never been trained to resourcefulness; he did not know what to do in a crisis.

It was sickening, he thought. Why, that tip was as *sure*! He'd go to town; see how bad things were; see what could be done.

Awaiting train connections in the junction station, he walked up and down restlessly, went out to the platform; felt that the old fisherman, the "drummer" and the woman in a black sunbonnet, fanning a baby, were regarding him curiously. He must not let his nervousness show like that.

There was a burning in his throat as if he wanted to cry.

It was strange that he dreaded the thought of confronting Mater, who always indulged him, and found himself wishing for Camille, who never, he felt, did him justice.

He'd go to the city; find out what was what; then come back and talk to Camille,—maybe she could think of something,—before he told the others.

A slight, graceful, smallish man, with dignity in

his bodily poise and scholarly simplicity in the smooth, swarthy face between two panels of straight white hair, a man with still-youthful fire in dark eyes, swung briskly into the station.

He stopped as, through the station window, he regarded Landry nervously pacing the platform.

Then Judge Julien Le Boeuf contracted his large, bright eyes to sharp points, sat where Landry could see him, opened a paper, waited.

Landry made two or three abortive attempts to approach him; then took a drink of water and came to him with a sad effort at naturalness.

"Bonjour, mon Oncle Jubat!"

"Bonjour, mon fils!" Judge Julien Le Boeuf made room for him. He was not a relative, except remotely, but had been *Oncle Jubat* to him always. "All going well with thee today?"

The compelling eyes were on the paper when Landry began to say "Yes," but they flashed up at him and he answered the truth to them, as every one did.

"No, sir. Going horribly."

"You will tell me, then," said Judge Julien simply; and Landry told him, after glancing cautiously about the station.

The woman and the fisherman, he knew, spoke no English; the "drummer" was a stranger and fast going to sleep.

But as the tale progressed, the sleepy "drummer" seemed to feel an astonishing interest in it. He put

a newspaper over his head, breathed steadily and hard; but his ears were alert behind it.

Judge Julien Le Boeuf forebore from comment on Landry's folly. "I realize," he said in his precise diction, "that every penny is needed on the plantation. But I suppose your family would prefer further losses there than to injure your career, so soon."

"Injure? To end it, sir!"

The Judge made one of his characteristic graceful gestures. "Oh! No! When you are my age,—though I am not old, of course," he relieved the air with a chuckle. "My hair is white, but not with age,—like the Prisoner of Chillon!—you will know, my dear young sir, that nothing *ends*. It is all the beginning of another beginning. But, they *would* rather hurt the plantation than your prospects; we may assume?"

"Of course, they would."

The Judge's eyes flashed displeasure but he veiled them and said, "Then, though you will doubtless find it against your conscience to put them to further sacrifice"—Landry felt uncomfortable under the glance that accompanied this—"I fear you must ask your father for the money he received yesterday for the sale of South Field."

Landry started, astonished. His father had sold a strip of the plantation and had not told him? He tried to conceal from the Judge that he did not know of the sale; but failed.

La Grande probably wanted to keep the money for the plantation, Judge Julien thought, so had not confided in this all-absorbent son. Too bad! But none the less a godsend. Not enough to meet his obligations; but at least a way to bridge the abyss for Landry.

Landry was torn by indecision. Should he go back home and "face the music"? His father's reproaches, his mother's tears? Or first go to the city and see what could be done there? He preferred that procrastination; something might come up; maybe Raoul Cantrelle would help him again. But suppose, in the meantime, his father should use that money! Camille had a hundred needs. Still—he ought to go to town.

"With your permission, *I* will advise your father, privately, of your difficulties, request him for you not to employ that money until you write or come," said the Judge, so long an adept at reading emotions. "And not to speak of it to *madame*, your mother, until it is necessary. If you choose?"

"Oh! *Will* you, *Oncle Jubat*? It'll be a life-saver. I know I'll be able to pull out, if only—Here's my train. *Oncle Jubat*, I can't tell you how I appreciate your inconveniencing yourself."

"No matter, that. My only trouble is my conscience as regards your sister."

"Oh! Camille can manage." He wrung the Judge's hand, swung on the train.

"And that is what the softness of women can do

to the blood of heroes!" the Judge meditated, recalling the stirring deeds of this worried boy's ancestors.

Just before the train started, the somnolent "drummer" asked the agent to change his ticket; he had altered his plans; he wouldn't go to Curéville after all; he'd go back to New Orleans.

He smiled at chance. "This is doggone good," he said to himself and entered the car, shared a section with Landry.

He was an amusing fellow in a broad, vulgar way; Landry allowed his advances, because he hated the society of his own anxieties, just then; was glad to forget them for a while.

When the train reached New Orleans his traveling companion told Landry he was mighty glad he'd met him, sort of providential just then; he was scouting for a friend who had lots of loose coin, wanted to invest in Louisiana securities. Looking for a broker. He'd taken a shine to Landry. If Landry cared to drop in to their hotel for dinner that night, he'd put him next. There was real money in this, and no long waiting for it, either. His man knew what he wanted. If they couldn't do business, nobody'd be any the worse for it. Come along, take a chance like Sweeney.

Landry dined, accordingly, with the well-dressed man from the North to whom his father's associate, the Prowler, had telephoned that day from New Iberia.

Some one had been trying to reach Landry himself by long distance, the hall-man told him when he returned to his own apartment. Some one in Curéville.

He so hoped it was Judge Julien Le Boeuf, as he waited for the maddeningly slow connections, that when he heard Elodi's voice Landry could not help showing disappointment in his own.

He regretted it afterward. He probably had sounded annoyed. But that was the trouble with girls,—always thought a man had nothing to do but play with them.

Cute youngster; but he mustn't let her assume too much. Calling him up from Curéville!

He wondered if he could sleep. He'd try again to locate Raoul before he turned in.

Little Elodi, in her room above the chinaberry trees, flooded with the fragrance of their blossoms, was crying herself to sleep because Landry hadn't been glad when she called him.

CHAPTER XI

WHO CAN, MUST

D'AN and Berne were coming down the shell-lily path, now pink with bloom, to the road beside the *coulée*, a pail for berries swinging between them. They met little black Beetee in the tall grasses with her glistening arms full of great red blossoms.

"I done brang you dese-hyere powerful big red lilies, Missy. Dey'll look handsome in de yaller vase. Shoestring done fatched 'em fo' *me*; he say I could keep 'em. But I's feared he done *stole* dem flowers from Mister Jonas; so I believe dey'll be better off in yo' keepin', Missy."

Beetee with the lilies made a "handsome" picture herself. "Painters go to the South Seas to get that," Dan said to Berne.

The weeks had slipped by, putting red and brown in Daniel's face, lifting his head. Louisiana was restoring him.

With an adaptability that was characteristic, he had glided into the life about him, delighting his grandfather by a graceful and whimsical companionship, charmingly winning the favor of his neighbors.

With equally characteristic *laissez-faire*, he was content to stay on, fishing, sailing, riding, loafing, being fêted and petted; as welcome in the square cottages of the 'Cajan laborers, where his French and his ancestry were a *passe-partout* for him, or on the fishermen's boats "down by de bayoo," as in the friendly homes of his own circle.

"What a pity he don't live here; no?" people said to one another. "He is so gay,—so young cavalier; yes?"—"You remember, maybe, Gaston Bardé, of the General the cousin?"—"Oh, yes! Before the War of the States he also was called the Gay Bardé. Everybody loved him too, like this one."—"Who could forget? I remember him when I was a child, me. You have right. This one is jost the same. Laugh, play, make you love him; *hein?*"—"He *listen* so polite to *every one*; alway know what you mean; is it no? Always something amiable to say back—*quick!* Oh, a brave young man!"—"He is true Louisianian, real Bardé, —too bad he goes away!"—"Oh, yes; too bad!"

From day to day, he put off decisions for his future. He liked it here. It was good for him. Wait, until he was sure he was well!

Berne was good for him, too. He knew that and he had fallen back into his childhood custom of "coming around to play with her." Even the pricks of her frank tongue he felt to be salutary to his laggard spirit; and their directness amused him. Her boyishness was restful; no appeal for unneeded

protection here; no demand for gallantry or compliments. Her friendship was sexless; or, at least, he thought so. And that left him free to fall in love with her, with nobody to be hurt but himself.

He must leave before he got to care too much, though. He felt himself going fast.

Too bad! But the thing would not do. Flame would never desert this place until it was safe, out of its debts, productive, secured for Little Brother and for them all, even if,—as he dared not dream,—he could win her. He knew that and, from what his grandfather said, he knew, too, that it was a long hope.

His own income, ample for a life of agreeable ease, with the background of his mother's larger resources, was by no means enough to rebuild the La Grande fortunes. As for spending his own life here,—on this *farm*,—impossible, of course! Equally of course, he could not desert his mother, who had always remained his playmate and for his sake had never remarried. He remembered how he had wept in the night when he was a boy and that young English captain,—well, she hadn't! And now it was his turn.

If he ever did marry, it must be some one in her group; even that would present emotional difficulties. She and Flame, she with her love of life's toys and games and elegancies, her graceful insincerities,—and Flame! He could not even imagine them together.

He looked at the tendrils that lay on Berne's white neck between the heavy braids of hair hanging over her shoulders, and took a quick breath. Yes, *sir*; he'd have to go home soon.

There were Martin Pinckney, who could afford to do anything he wished for Ile Imaginaire, and that Guidry youngster, who, at least, could run a plantation. He winced at the thought of either; but what had he to do with it,—who could not offer himself?

If he were at work in his profession,—off somewhere in the mines making enough to live on so that they could put the plantation under a manager,—Flame in the West with him,—what a comrade! Supposing, of course, that she would!

No,—he would not entirely “put it up” to his mother! He, himself; would he make good, do Flame justice, become able to relieve these conditions without asking her to wait longer than would be fair to her? Honestly, he did not know.

Even before the War, he had been none too secure against the call of the things he liked, summers on the Brittany Coast or in the Berkshires or on a boat out of Nantucket; winters on the Riviera or in Rome with his jolly mother. It had been hard to stick even to college when these were calling. And now,—when he was used up, could not keep a steadfast interest in anything for long! He never would dare take a chance with Flame's happiness now.

The answer was that he must not want to do so. Oh, but he did want to!

Before the War he had *played*, but he had not *loafed*. He had always been busy at something or other, however unimportant, always planning something pleasant, putting something interesting into shape, learning to be expert at something.

But now! Would he stick to the mines? Could he?

Dan was very young. His mother had spoiled him. It will not do to be too hard upon him. He was hard upon himself, and, perhaps, that was a sign in his favor. He had not discovered what lay within him beneath the gaiety and kindness that made other people make allowances for him. He made none for himself, at least.

He decided just to play awhile longer with Flame, keep from caring if he could, be happy while the comradeship lasted. Meanwhile, he was good for her, too; he could see that, himself. She needed to be made gay. "Gather the rosebuds while ye may!"

But the arc of the tin handle of the bucket between her hand and his seemed alive, vibrant in his palm.

Well, nobody was hurt but him; Flame probably placed him somewhere between Landry and Odrasse.

"I'm afraid to ask what you're thinking so hard," he said, "for fear you'll say something learned about crops. But why so terribly severe the morn?"

You hardly thanked Beetee for letting you receive the stolen goods for her."

She laughed. "You're such a festive soul, you think that everybody who isn't laughing is getting ready to cry. Just then, I was thinking about you."

"And that made you so sad?"

"When do you go away?"

"Ah! It is a compliment, after all. You'll be sorry, Flame?"

"But it will mean that you are well."

They were turning into the narrow, shaded *coulée* road, under the high bushes. He put down the bucket, laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Camille Berenicia Marie," he said reproachfully. "Are you hinting to me to be gone?"

A quick flash of pain betrayed her. Daniel—gone!

"Oh, no! I want you to stay and play, Da! You *know* I do. Why, I've been waiting for you to come and play ever since they took you away, 'way back yonder! But, of course, the main thing for *you* is getting back into life again, being sound. I wondered—"

But he had seen that flash of pain in Berne's eyes; he recognized it. His throat was throbbing.

"Berne! Flame!" he whispered, dizzy with the discovery.

She smiled with pressed lips, and put her hand upon his mouth.

"Sh! Da!" she said. "Better not! I know all

about it,—*Gai-Da*. What you've been—thinking. It wouldn't do, of course. Far better take the friendship,—and let's not say any more."

"You—*know*, Flame?"

"Of course. But that's no reason for not living along. *Garde-toi!* Let's go berrying."

"You most amazing—! You are right. I must not let *you* care. It won't matter about me."

She said quite simply,—her nature was too frank, even in all the small things of life, to bear evasion or false concealment in a great one,—“No. It won't matter about you; because you don't care very much. Just a new shoot; easy to pluck it up. But it's a habit with me, you see. Had time to grow—deep roots. All my life. Come, *Da!*”

“Flame,—my dear girl! I cannot—” He held her shoulders tight. “You can't mean—”

“Let me go, *Dan*,” said Berne with a strange deep note in her voice. “Let me go. You don't know what you are doing.”

He dropped his hands. “You won't let me tell you I—”

“No. Let's go berrying.”

Daniel was ashamed of himself for obeying her; yet he knew that she was right.

“I'm not worth it,” he said, picking up the pail.

“No,” said Berne.

He turned amazed, hurt eyes to her.

“No; you're not,” she repeated.

“Then, why—”

"Who knows? The little long-ago one was worth it. It was with *him* I fell in love, you know. That energetic small boy who always 'took up' for me,—was always so ready to fight for his opinions—had such dreams!" She smiled wistfully at the old memory. "He sort o' made a background for my own dreams when they came. *Prince Florizel* and *John Ridd* used to look like him to me. So—you see! Just a habit. Let it be. Let's go berrying. What *you* need is something to do, *mon ami*."

"Reckon you're right, honey. You're not fond of *me*. It's a little shaver you remember you've been hankering after. Just like out of a story-book, as you say. Better so. Heaps better so. And I'm *not* worth it; you're right about that, too. Only, honey, 'taint sweet to hurt a fellow's pride so *enthusiastically*. You went *to* it with your little scalpel; didn't you?" He tried to laugh. "'I'm no good,' says I. 'Double it,' says she."

"O Dan dear!"

"Of course, *I* know why I'm so inconsiderable. But what makes *you* so sure of it? Is it because I'm—"

"Lazy."

"No. I don't believe I am. You know how hard I play!"

"You're the best playmate in the world!"

"Thanks for the crumb!—No'm; I'm *not* lazy. It *is* something to play with pep. Real lazy folk

don't. No. It's just not having had sufficient reason to toil, Flame. Idle, frivolous; all right. Not lazy. And one's environment! Now, Over There, I loved to labor. There was a cause. But before that, when I used to get restless and want to settle to something definite and my mother'd want to go travelling instead,—why, everything I could think of doing was being done and well done by a lot of experts; much keener than I." His voice was eager; not apologetic, not pleading. He only wanted her to think as well of him as she could. "Nobody, nothing, seemed to need my work, as much as my mother and the rest of them needed my play. It did sort of jazz them up to have me around. Is that a conceited remark?"

His winning grin faded. "Then the War—finished me even for that. I do want to work." He refrained from pleading his illness; but it was that that held his imagination; could he stand firm now, ill as he was? "That Flame you were telling me about, dear,—mine's had nothing to feed it.—You said 'friendship.' You need a strong friend, *Berenicia mia*. Not just a playmate." He was silent, then, "Like Martin Pinckney. Or good Odrasse." Then, suddenly, "No! I'll be hanged if I'll let that stand! I'm as strong a friend as any. And I could be as good a—well!"

"Never mind, Dan," Berne whispered.

But her thought said, "If he loved me, he'd have reason enough to conquer, illness and all. I'm not

the kindling for his fire. Not the mate for whom he'll want to build a nest." She was as honest with her own heart as with the world, this girl.

Daniel's eyes smarted; he knew what she must be thinking; saw the justice of it; and yet he knew that he did love her, none the less.

The boy was confusing his illness and his training with *himself*. He felt the strength underlying; but could not reach it. Well, if play was all he could do, he'd do that well, at least. He wouldn't be a whiner and spoil what joy there was.

"I accept the diagnosis, Doctor," he said. "I'm all you say. But I'm fond of you all the same, dear girl."

He lifted the arched handle of the pail and kissed her hand that held it.

She patted his head with the other. "Don't be sorry," she said. "And don't go 'pooring' *me*, old fellow. I've got a heap to think about before I begin to pine," she laughed. "And, unless I miss my guess, here comes trouble right now."

Peter was running towards them, had made a short cut through the bushes.

"Hey! Sis! Please come back home a minute! I'm in trouble." He was panting. "Come on quick, *please!*"

"What is it, Peterkin?"

"Get your breath, son," Dan advised. "You sound like an air compressor."

Peter began breathlessly, a worried frown be-

tween his brows, but a twinkle, in spite of him, in his eyes.

“Uncle Hope was wondering why the big white hen’s chicks didn’t hatch out. And he sneaked back to the hen-house to see if anything was *at* her, or anything. And when he got to the hen-house,”—Peter threw back his head and couldn’t help laughing,—“there were Leonard and Robbie,”—the two smallest lads from Gertrude Plantation. Peter stopped for breath. “And they’d chased the big hen off the nest and—Gee!—but she was mad! And Leonard was hovering the eggs—kind of sitting on ’em—and Robbie was up on the roof of the hen-house, flapping his wings and crowing. They said they were helping the hen.”

“But how did that put *you* in trouble?” Berne asked, when she could.

Peter was all anxiety again. “Oh! Uncle Hope is going to punish *Gamin* for it. And I don’t want *Gamin* punished.”

“*Gamin*,—the *dog*?” Dan asked.

“Yessir. *Gamin*’s in charge of the chickens and Uncle Hope says *Gamin* shouldn’t have permitted it. Oh, Sis! He’s cutting a switch! I hear him. Won’t you *please* come stop him?”

In the chicken yard,—with its background of fig-trees, draped in moss for the chickens to pick at, and decorated with large red-combed white roosters, like a series of Japanese screens,—*Gamin*, the fox-terrier, was herding his snowy flocks, rounding up

strays, snapping at the quarrelsome, separating the fighters, authoritatively hustling about, not knowing what a humiliation Uncle Hope was preparing.

Two remorseful small boys were interceding for him.

"Aw, now! Uncle Hope! Gamin couldn't keep us from going in the hen-house. Honest!" said Leonard. "You can tell our Dad on *us*, if you want."

"Oh! Poo!" chubby little Robbie exclaimed. "Don't need to tell *nobody* on *nobody*. Old hen's all right. And we didn't *break* the eggs."

"Nossah!" Uncle Hope said relentlessly. "Reckon you-all ain't heard tell what de old folks' proverb say: 'Rat eats de cane, but Lizard dies for it.'"

"I don't know what that means, Uncle Hope. But, *please*, don't beat Gamin for what we did," cried Leonard. "We'll never, never do it again. We didn't know it would hurt anything."

"Uh-huh! Think about dat now, hey? Dat's it. Dat's how it is. 'If-I-had-knowed always marches behind, never leads de way.' Dat's what de old folks say. Well, den, does you young gentlemen swear to pretty you won't never seduce Gamin from his bounden duty no mo' and you won't never infringe on dese-hyere chicken-yard premises?"

"Oh, yes! We will promise."

"Yes; me, too!"

“All right, den, if you is made up yo’ minds not to infest dis yard no mo’. Run along and play. Go on, now. *Allez!*”

He threw away the switch and turned, grinning, to Daniel. “Reckon I wouldn’t hit dat Gamin dog fo’ *nobody*, Mist’ Daniel. But dat’s de way to bring up li’l gentlemen, sah; dat’s how we fatches up our gentlemen,—make ’em regret de result of dey’ misdoin’s by showin’ how it gwine come down and hurt somebody else. Yes, Lawd. Dat’s de way I brung up Mist’ Ned, and now look what a monstrous fine man he done growed to! ’Twas me done did it. Um-huh.”

The way to bring up gentlemen? Right-o! Old Hope was right, Dan thought, and nobody was going to take *this* licking but himself. He’d go away *pronto* lest any of his “misdoing” should “come down on” Flame. She did not really care, now; that was plain. It was what she remembered of their childhood,—or thought she did; she’d said so. Lonely here, dreaming of their little days together. It was touching; it was sweet. But it wasn’t being in love with him. He wouldn’t let it grow to be.

“You isn’t gwine berryin’, Miss Berne?” Uncle Hope eyed the pail.

“Unless you need me, Uncle Hope.”

No; he didn’t need her. He only thought she might want to interview Onestide, though. He was having trouble with the pump. And also, Hope

had reason to suspect,—he glanced at her vacantly but Berne got his intended warning,—*somebody* was going to visit her father that morning.

She sighed. The berrying was over.

“Cares again?” Dan asked sympathetically. But Berne was indifferent then to his sympathy, seemed almost to forget him. Would he mind waiting on the porch? She must go to Onestide.

Berne’s cares had been heavy since that day when she had returned from Petite Anse to discover Landry at home, hysterically undoing all that Judge Julien Le Boeuf had adroitly prepared for him the night before.

Berne had found her mother in bed in tears and her father on the verge of collapse, but for once adamant in his position.

No. He had *promised* all the money received from the sale of South Field, he maintained; Landry could not have it. Some was already applied; the rest was promised, definitely, unalterably. No; he did not care to tell for what. What did that matter? The result was to save them all,—it was more important even than Landry’s affair. Landry could find some other way; he *must* find one. He could not have this money. No.

He showed the strength of the weak, poor gentleman, suffering between his wife’s reproaches and Landry’s importunities. It was bitter for him to see Mater’s grief. But he stood his ground.

Of course, the others assumed that it was for

the plantation that the money was needed. For Camille, of course! Of all the mismanaged places! This plantation was a sieve!

Berne had had a terrible interview with them all in Mater's bedroom. But she took the blame they gave her; for the Commodore's sake said nothing, refused to reveal her knowledge of his secret, regarded the sign of silence he made to her. She was jealous for his self-respect, poor Commodore! She knew what ridicule, what complaints, would follow his revelation. Bad enough for him when the inevitable failure of his wild dreams should come. Let him save his dignity, at least.

He believed it was his project that she was saving, and that it was worth her championship; so he allowed her to shield it, much as it irked him.

He had slipped into her room that night and kissed her as she slept, whispered, "*My son!*" Then, looking down at her, suddenly remorseful, "*My poor little girl!*" he had amended.

It had ended, as all the financial troubles ended, by a greater burden on the land. They had mortgaged part of the rice-crop to tide Landry over the crisis. He needed only to be tided over, he said; he would soon recover. Besides, he had something big up his sleeve. He had his secrets, too, he told his father. Berne felt a menace as he said it.

Mater and Landry had gone to the city, relieved; Mr. La Grande was left to his mystery and to comparative peace.

But Berne had as little faith in Landry's schemes as in her father's.

Soon that extended note would come due.

It all depended on a good crop. *Le bon Dieu* send a good crop and good prices!

All that money, she thought today, all that money for her dear South Field poured into the claws of the buzzard called Prowler, who was coming back that day!

Uncle Hope was doing excellently with the few cattle and the corn. Nothing must happen to the rice!

She stood now on a little rise of ground under the arch of an oak, looked over the blue lagoons Ben-Dayed with green points of growing rice. It was going well so far. If they could only keep up that pump and that tractor. A little grass had grown as tall as the rice on account of the late planting,—if they could keep it “drowned” and the rice sustained with water! There was no indigo weed. No sign of wild rice. Little fear of blight. All flourishing,—so far!

But her eyes clouded as they fell on Bayou Vermilion. From her hillock, she commanded a long sweep of its wild, winding channel. She could see that the stream was low. The usual summer rains had not come.

There was a cloud of glistening dust about that wagon driving along the road; the leaves of the Cherokee bushes were powdered white as flower-petals. The sun beat hot.

Berne smoothed her brow with both hands.

"It's *got* to come through. Ile Imaginaire has its Flame Within, too. Its own Life must save it. I'll not worry. I'll leave it to the Flame. And work like the deuce!" She smiled, but the smile faded quickly.

The buggy in its cloud of dust passed below her.

"That man!" She saw the Prowler driving. Better dressed now and driving his buggy; Berne knew where the money for that came from. He could always be expected when Mater was in the city.

Ah, well! Now for faithful, worried Onestide!

She hated to ask it of her kind neighbor in his own busy season, but she knew that Mr. Jonas of Gertrude Plantation would come again and lend his men's aid on that outworn tractor and pump.

Dear Dan would have to wait today, till she had done her tasks. She knew he would wait,—while she worked. She set her lips, swung back the heavy braids over her shoulders and went briskly to see about the pump.

At least the Prowler could not get much more from her father. There'd be no more to give him. Blessed be nothing!

She whistled to a scarlet tanager swinging on the yaupon tree, smiled at a flurry of painted buntings that flashed past her, set her mind on her job.

CHAPTER XII

DANIEL IS ENLISTED

AS Dan sat on the brick terrace waiting for Berne, he surveyed himself, trying to see the situation straight. But straight, clear thinking was difficult while there floated before his eyes Berne's face, suddenly for a fleeting moment soft, yearning, loving,—for that second, his.

His? Or that little boy's,—the boy he used to be back yonder? The boy she had relied upon, admired. Was that boy quite dead?

His thought was interrupted by hoof-beats.

The blue filly cantered to the gate. Odrasse tied her and came up the lily-path. He had come to talk to Berne and was disappointed at finding Daniel there before him.

The boy was torn between jealousy that made Daniel's proximity almost unbearable to him and a younger man's esteem for one who had had heroic experiences, a country lad's admiration for the graces of a cosmopolitan.

Daniel read the boy easily. He liked this young planter, appreciated his efforts to be hospitable to him. Odrasse had taken Dan fishing, sponsored

him at a country ball, introduced him to the most interesting of the trappers and hunters. Pretty decent, for a lad who felt him to be trespassing on his "best girl's" society.

Dan wanted to win his friendship. He talked about Vitesse, the blue filly, revealing a knowledge of a horse's points that raised him in Odrasse's opinion. He gave him some good stories of the polo field. He told him, quite casually, that his stay in the parish was nearing its close, and then, with the naturalness of two friends admiringly discussing a third, he talked about Berenicia.

Odrasse felt an immense relief. Evidently he'd been a sort of chump; had misjudged the situation. Bardé had not been trying to take Berne away. Of course, they'd want to be together, life-long friends like that, for the short time they had. — He had let his jealousy keep him from a mighty fine friendship, and he was going to try to make up for it in the time left him. Why, he actually liked talking about Berenicia to Bardé now!

"She's a wonder," he said. "You have to run a plantation to know how hard it is to keep everything going on a place like this, keep everybody happy, Bardé, to know what a wonder Berne is. A pretty girl like her,—don't you think she's mighty pretty?"

"Beautiful." Dan, realizing that he liked to talk about her as much as the other did, smiled cynically at himself. "She looked like the Edwin

Abbey *Cordelia* today, with her two heavy coppery braids of hair—”

“That’s a picture, I suppose? *Cordelia!* Oh! King Lear’s daughter, wasn’t she? Why, *admirable!* That’s exactly like Berne. Isn’t that the one who always told the truth and wouldn’t say more than she meant and suffered for it,—and was so loyal? Why, Mr. Bardé, that’s *Berne!* If that picture looks like her, I reckon that that artist understands faces.”

Then Odrasse added, half under his breath, “I wish some one could take the burdens from her.”

And Daniel, uncomfortable at being under false colors, replied simply, “I wish to God *I* could, Guidry. But I can’t.”

So that was it! There was a long silence. Then Odrasse said, “*Dommage!* It’s a pity. If it couldn’t be myself, I’d like—” but he was too honest to complete the sentence. He wouldn’t like it to be anybody. He blushed and by one of those strange twists of thought-entanglement, as he felt himself blushing, he remembered Elodi Huval in the little plaza, blushing under the pink sunshade.

A cloud of dust subsiding at the gate, revealed the Prowler in his buggy. Odrasse frowned at the man, who went out back of the house and down to the bayou’s marge to join Mr. La Grande.

Your Creole-’Cajan is an interesting combination of caution and impulsiveness. He has a surface suspicion of strangers that keeps him almost dour

until his heart is reached; but a smile, a turn of a phrase, a sympathetic sentiment can reach it in a moment. Then he is subject to generous, immediate capitulation, becomes in a flash a welcoming host, a devoted friend, as enthusiastic and unsuspecting as a child. And he holds loyally to those to whom he gives himself.

Thus Odrasse belonged to Daniel now and with the frankness of his kind, he said to him, "Did you see that man? If you want to help Berne, help me watch *him*. You have nothing to do. You have time. Will you help me watch that fellow?"

"I—what do you mean? That man *hurt* Berenicia? Why, her father is receiving him! What—I don't understand."

"Oh, my friend, you can't be down here even this long without finding out that *monsieur*, Berne's father, is darn easy to impose upon! I'm not giving anything away; everybody knows it."

"Yes. I've been told."

"Will you walk to the *coulée*?" Mr. La Grande and the Prowler were approaching the house. "I'm going to tell you. *Si*. I'm going to tell you."

Seated on a log by the *coulée*, Odrasse told Daniel how he and Berenicia had made a heronry in the swamp woods where some of Mr. Ned's birds had chosen to nest, patterned after the paradise at Petite Anse.

"There are two little lakes, pools, in the woods, partly on La Grande, partly on Guidry land. It

was Guidry land.” He sighed. “One, on a small dry plateau, is called Pool o’ the Moon. The other’s more down in the swamp; Berne named it *L’Ecu des Cypres* for the crown, the ring, of cypress trees around it. That’s the one the herons live on. I said both pools used to be part on our land, part on theirs; but my father sold our strip to Mr. La Grande. I was pretty mad at first. I’m a terrible hot-head, *mon ami!* I thought Berne was trying to get rid of *me*. I’m a fool; that’s true. You see, it was just after I had tried to tell her—”

“Quite natural. And *now* you are suspicious of what? Why?”

It did not seem reasonable, Odrasse said, for a planter to exchange good land for useless swamp, as Mr. La Grande had done. To be sure, there was timber on it; but hard to get out and La Grande already had more swamp timber than he needed. Besides, Odrasse saw that something was worrying Berne; she kept going into the heronry; seemed to be *watching*. Odrasse felt that she was on guard and that she didn’t want to say why. He didn’t like Berne’s going into the swamp alone, even with her little revolver.

“I was afraid it was some fool scheme and that Mr. La Grande was being *used* and that she suspected it. So I got the idea of building a platform like Mr. Ned’s,—like a little blind, you know,—in our heronry. She wants it to be *ours* just the same.” He flushed again. “And so I told Berne

I'd be in there and she said, 'I wish you would, 'Drasse.' So I did."

"She said she wished it, so Odrasse did," Daniel said to himself. He envied Odrasse.

Hidden in the thicket where he was building his platform, Odrasse went on, he had seen that man acting "funny." Once he had taken a picture of herons in their nest and that made Odrasse think he was a plume-hunter. But, at another time, he had followed him cautiously and had seen him with instruments and papers at the edge of Pool o' the Moon; and that was farther off, by a dry place; in the same forest, but out of the morass,—where no nests were.

"But what could he want? Why fear him? What harm could he do there?" Daniel asked. Odrasse did not know. But Berne seemed to feel he needed watching; that was enough for Odrasse. And why did he bring, as twice he had done, strange people with him?

Now, however, as the season advanced, Odrasse was so busy with the plantation, it was impossible to keep his watch. For days he was unable to go there at all. And Berne was just as busy; everybody was. Nobody went in the swamp at all. But Bardé had nothing to do. Would he not sometimes go from the Guidry woods to the Pool o' the Moon and *L'Ecu des Cypres* and—"

"And play sentinel? Certainly," Dan assented readily, because it was hard to refuse and because

it amused him; not that he took Odrasse's fears seriously. The man was probably a queer coot who liked to hang about in the swamps; or maybe he disobeyed game laws, at worst.

But, as soon as Daniel had consented to do this protective thing for Berne, useless as he thought it, there rose in him a flood of elation, a joyous up-rush of energy that left him astonished at himself.

"You say this fellow had people with him? Don't you know who they were?"

"One, I know. Borel Veriot. A young loafer. Lives at Petite Anse. But I can't *ask* anything unless Berne lets me. Maybe her father said they could go there. But I don't *like* it, Bardé."

"You'll show me the way soon?"

"Now; if you want. We can leave word with old Hope for Berne."

Daniel could not help smiling at Odrasse's zeal. Kids always dream of rescuing their ladies, he thought. He was not many years older than Odrasse, but he felt greatly his senior. And his smile broadened as he saw, through the window, this man, whom Odrasse thought menacing, closeted in confidential talk with Flame's father.

Odrasse's bright blue eyes shone as Dan put his arm across the boy's shoulder and accompanied him to the stables. The Bardé buggy was waiting there; they both rode in it, leading an outraged Vitesse behind them.

Mr. La Grande sat at the *escritoire*, the Prowler,

clipped and brushed but not the less predatory and disagreeable, was near him.

"I tell you, my man, this check is not only small, as you justly observe," Mr. La Grande smiled the cryptic smile. "But also it is final. There is no more. *C'est tout. Finis.* The end. You understand? I cannot raise another cent. You must finish or—we *are* finished."

Prowler leaned forward, took the check, then whispered, "I *have* finished."

Mr. La Grande flushed painfully. "You have—found it?" His thin hand beat a tattoo on the desk. "You thought, before,—twice before,—and—and you were wrong. Are you sure, now?"

"Practically sure. Before, we didn't own that strip of Guidry woods."

"*We* sir?"

"Aw, *you* of course! Don't need to go off like that. We couldn't find that buried rock before,—not many rocks around in this neighborhood; you said yourself that if there *was* one, it must have fallen from the sky,—a meteor or something. Well we found it. A big, black, sunk rock. Queer lookin'. Maybe it is a meteor. And the two Indian mounds. And—other things. Not much further to go. Unless I miss my guess and I bet yer I don't miss it, we're pretty hot on the trail."

"If it is in the land I got from Guidry," a cloud crossed his face. "Perhaps we ought to share—"

"Aw! No!" quickly. "The *rock's* on his side

of the water; but it looks to me like the *stuff's* on yourn. Anyway it was stolen from *your* folks."

"Water? The Cypress Pool?"

The Prowler started guiltily. "No! No! Most likely that white pool—where I thought it was—further on."

"The Pool o' the Moon?"

"That what you call it? Well, in two weeks from today, let's say, we'll *know*. Then get your men and I'll have mine and we'll drain and dig and *find* her; eh?"

"In two weeks!" Mr. La Grande sank back in his chair. He rang for coffee.

Singsie looked at him sharply as she brought it. There were hectic spots in his cheeks.

At last the Prowler drew the check from his pocket, refolded and replaced it there, rose and held out his hand to Mr. La Grande. This time his host took the proffered hand.

As they stood in the doorway, an automobile was heard coming from Curéville.

"Probably my son," Mr. La Grande said. "He is bringing a guest from the city. Pardon! I'll go to the gate. *Adieu!* Good luck!"

But Prowler stood rooted to the spot, a sickly white, his eyes fixed upon the large, loud man seated beside Landry.

"The devil!" he gasped. "What the hell did he have to come down here himself for?—Is he 'on,' or what?—Well, he'll have to move quick to get

me off of my game; I'll tell him. Good work I got the check before he come!"

He slipped behind the house as Landry opened the car-door for Elodi, sweet as a flower in her favored pink, whom he had found in her garden in Curéville and invited to come visit Berne.

CHAPTER XIII

JUD BURDEN TELLS THE WORLD

BERNE met the Prowler in the road. He took off his hat to her with an exaggerated deference, an ugly expression in his opaque eyes. For the first time since their encounter in the woods, he ventured to speak to her.

"*Well*, Miss La Grande," he said. "Not goin' to shoot me today? You certainly was mad that time. And, you see, I wasn't hurting a thing. With all your watching me, you haven't got a thing on me; now, have you?"

"That's well," Berne said and tried to pass.

He placed himself in her path.

"Wait a minute, please'm. Want to ask you somethin'."

"Yes?"

"What you got against me? I never done you nothing. Why'd you go tell Borel Veriot's boss not to let him get away from the salt mine, not to leave him have so many days off? 'Cause you found out he was goin' around with me? Huh?"

"Borel has often been in trouble. Mr. Ned is giving him his last chance in the mine. Several

times he has been here, far away from his work, with you, and has got drunk somewhere around this place. I won't have that and I don't want any of Mr. Ned's people getting in bad company on Imaginaire. So I told the foreman."

"Bad company?" menacingly.

"Boys don't get drunk in good company. Step out of my way, please."

"*Just* a minute, miss! I got to tell you something. I need Borel on some business for your Paw. So he's coming with me now, a few days, leave or no leave, drunk or sober. I said, *business for your Paw*. So, please, keep your hands off. Don't go telling his Maw where he is, nor his girl, nor his boss, nor nobody. Ask your Paw, if you don't want to do like I say. It's made us trouble enough, your buttin' in. So just kindly lay off; will you?"

Berne's cheeks were pulsating; the angry little girl who threw the oyster shell at Daniel looked out of her eyes. But she pressed her lip and waited until the muscles of her cheeks were quiet, the golden eyes still and cool again.

"I don't like the way you speak to me," she said. "Get out of my way."

After a few steps she turned. "One thing! If you're taking advantage of my father, you'll pay for it. Every gentleman around here is his friend. And they're not all as—kind as he is."

"So!" he said to himself as she went on.

"That's it; is it? Well, *now*, I'll go through with the other thing, no matter what Burden came down here for. Every damn bird! I'll show her!"

Berne decided not to tell her father of the man's impertinence. Trouble enough telling him the tractor had broken again.

He, meanwhile, was lying on the couch, trying to entertain Landry's guest. It astonished him that his son had brought this visitor home. Of course he understood,—a business acquaintance; perhaps it was policy. But he was of the old school and found that thought distasteful.

The large visitor was dressed in cream-color summer clothing with too yellow an undertone; his tie was vivid and the hat Beete had taken from him was broad and flowing as if he had used it to "make up" as a planter because he was visiting a plantation; it had been fastened to his shoulders by a cord. His hands, heavy enough in themselves, were heavier with symbol rings of obscure orders; the finger-nails were shiny and pink, manicured by some woman, his host supposed with a shudder.

"Yes *sir*," he was exclaiming. "I like Loosyanner; always did. Best cooking in the world right here. Especially coffee and fish. *Do* they know how to cook fish in N'Yawlins? I'll tell the world! Was a man up in Philly in a hotel there,—know Philly, Mr. La Grande? Best soup and ice-cream in the world; pepper-pot, they call the soup; don't forget, if you go there,—I told him, I said, 'Fish in

the Atlantic; do you? Not for me. No, sir! Not in California, either. California for salads,—they make a melon-salad! Gosh-a-liberty! And such lettuce!—but the Gulf's the place for fish and N'Yawlin's is where they can cook it.' And oysters! 'Course, you *can* get bully ones, too, from Chesapeake Bay; but they don't know how to cook 'em anywhere in the North. Stew! Lord! Slop! After you've been *here*. I'm a Northerner myself and I hope I'm as good a booster as the next one. Ask me about corn beef and I'll show you if I'm not. Chi's the place for corn beef,—that's where they can boil it soft and yet keep the strength in. Know Chicago, Mr. La Grande? I'll give you an address where they boil the best beef in the world. Oh! I know they *say* New England for that. But not any. Only place in New England they can cook is Providence. Fix the best broiled baby lobsters,—know how to cook 'em *through* without killing the flavor. Ever been to Providence, Mr. La Grande? Good town. Never ate any Northern fish good as those lobsters except—say, if you ever go to Seattle and want *salmon*! Now, that *is* a Northern fish that's a bird. I know a place in Seattle—"

Mr. La Grande tried to look impressed, passed his hand over his mouth.

Elodi, on the porch with a book, pressed her handkerchief between her lips; her shoulders were shaking.

When Landry came down the outside stairway

and joined her, she took his hand and led him on a run into a wild-tangled arbor of Virgin's bower. There she laughed so heartily that the myriad flowers of the vine,—little yellow candles in snow-white stands,—shook as with a breeze.

Landry laughed with her, not knowing why.

"What relief!" she cried. "Evidently this *Monsieur* Burden likes fish; eh?" She laughed again. "Oh, *oui!* I should say this man knows where one should eat. *Ciel!* His map of the world, it is one large *mênu* card. He has now crossed the continent up and down, east to west, on his appetite. I suppose now he will pass the oceans; eh? Poor *Monsieur* La Grande! He must lie like this"—she spread her hands horizontally,—“and escort this *gourmand* on his tour of the world, without escape.” She wiped her eyes. “But me, thank the saints, I have saved myself, just in time!” She laughed still harder.

Landry shook her. “You be still! He’ll hear you yet. Better be practising self-control anyway. You have to dine with him, you know.”

“*Impossible!* I shall sprain me the ankle first. Or maybe, in the presence of the food, he will give silent devotion. Eh? To be hope’!”

“Never mind him. Sit here and talk to me awhile,” Landry said. She *was* pretty, sitting in one of the accidental windows of the arbor with the delicate-flowered tendrils of the vine between her dark head and the sunlight. It was no longer a

bore, coming down here, since he'd begun chumming with Elodi. "I've missed you like the dickens, Elodi."

Elodi dimpled.

"Maybe that's true," she teased. "If yes, I have a surprise for you. Mrs. Thurston has invited me to be her house-guest in New Orleans. I am going for the Yacht Club dance. And to stay awhile after. You like this idea?"

A slight shade crossed Landry's face, but it was gone before she could have read it. His attentions to Elodi were innocent chumship, of course; but he did not care to have Helen Jeffrey made aware of them just then.

"Splendid!" he said. "Only I wish I had known it earlier. I'd have so enjoyed escorting you to the dance if you and Mrs. Thurston'd let me; but I've already accepted an invitation myself. The Jeffreys are giving a dinner on their boat—"

"Oh! That is all right," said Elodi casually. "We have also a party." But there were quick tears in her eyes. These flattered Landry. Sweet child!

He tilted her chin upward in his hand, astonished that she let him; Elodi was generous only with her smiles.

"Honey!" he said. "Are you sorry we can't play together all the time? As if I wouldn't come over to your gang every minute that I can! And I'll call on you, of course,—"

It suddenly impressed Elodi that her usual relationship with men was being reversed. She hastened to restore it, "If I am not engaged, I shall be happy to see you. But dear Mrs. Thurston, she has many plans for me."

Landry laughed. "Some day,—I warn you, miss,—if you put on such airs with your pretty mouth, curl it up so, I may take a liberty."

"You are taking one now, by that speech," she said, but dimpled again, not displeased.

"You'll make a hit. No girl in the city dances better," he told her.

"Oo—ee! All 'Cajans have dancing feet. We are born so. Men, too. You have seen Odrasse Guidry at a ball?"

"I never notice *men* at a dance. And Guidry and I never hit it off well enough for me to stand around admiring him."

Elodi felt a slight resentment. "You don't like Odrasse?"

"Oh! Not as bad as that. Just think him a rube."

"Rube? *Qu'est-ce-que-c'est*, a rube? What you mean?"

"Oh, sort o' simple. Countrified, you know."

Elodi looked at him as severely as her soft eyes could. "You are a planter's son, yourself, *mon-sieur*. And me,—a *rubess*, too, maybe!"

"Oh, come, Elodi! You're the sweetest thing extant, and I'm glad we're planters." He took her

hand; she smiled forgivingly. "No objection to *living* in the country,—if you have to. It's being *countrified* that makes Odrasse—what I said."

"Odrasse is my friend. If you please!"

"So—I—see!" He lifted his brows. "Didn't know it *meant* anything to you, Elodi."

"How you mean—'meant anything'? What you infer because I will not have my old friends criticize'?"

Landry hated to be put in the wrong, could not conceive of himself as an offender, was not generous enough to assume blame readily.

"Much ado about *rien-du-tout*; isn't it? You like Odrasse; I don't—very much. What boots it?"

Elodi, whose swains had been brought up in the tradition, "The ladies are always right," felt a slight shock at this.

"But you should not infer—"

"Oh, I wasn't inferring anything. All your imagination, child. Please don't scold."

"No, Landry! Let my hand rest, please! Infer what you choose. If Odrasse is a rube, me too, I am one. We are friends. Rubes together. I am as *moch countrified* as Odrasse."

"Well, if you want to quarrel, my dear, suit yourself. I suppose *you* know what it's all about."

Landry sat on the opposite side of the arbor, occasionally half-smiling at her. Elodi felt that she was showing more temper than the incident war-

ranted; but Landry should have been instantly sorry; should have said so. She took out her handkerchief, wiped her eyes.

"Storm over?" Landry asked.

She couldn't help laughing. She liked him so much. He crossed over, put his arm along the back of her bench.

"Aren't we silly?" he whispered.

She assented, sitting up quite straight but yet pleasantly conscious of his arm behind her.

"Then say, 'I'm sorry I was cross to poor Landry, who is my slave,' " he cajoled her.

"I'm sorry. And now, you say, too, 'I'm sorry that I called Odrasse, the friend of Elodi, a rube.' "

He couldn't help teasing her; she was so naïve, this pretty little country coquette. He dared to touch the lace frill on her shoulder. "I'm—sorry," he began slowly. "I'm sorry that Odrasse is—the friend of Elodi. Is that it?"

Her cheeks flamed. "*I* apologized," she said.

"I'm sorry that I made Elodi cross by telling her that her friend, Odrasse, is a—"

Elodi rose, chin high, marched from the arbor with as grand an air of injured dignity as her rosy, round person could muster.

Landry looked after her, smiling. Piquant, he thought. This situation had needed some spice. All the better; "making up" would be fun.

Now, for a less agreeable interview. He went in to join his father and Burden.

Elodi would probably find his sister and that would keep Berne out of the way for awhile, too; a good thing.

But Berne, returning, did not see Elodi, who had gone down to the bayou and walked along its hyacinth-brocaded shore, gathering star-lilies and trying not to cry.

Berne came in the rear door of the living-room, her gray work-blouse open at the throat, her sleeves rolled high, a bright blue covert-quill of a teal duck,—picked up at the edge of the rice-field,—sticking, Indian fashion, in one of her swinging braids of hair. She was startled at seeing a stranger, but scarcely more so than the visitor was at her appearance.

“That’s the sharp little lady that had the pistol,” he thought. “Gosh-a-liberty! They didn’t tell me she was such a kid; or such a good-looker! Red-heads always lucky for me, though. No need to be afraid of a kid like her.”

This blustering Burden was never unmindful of ladies’ charms. He could not be, for he was in the millinery business; but, besides, he liked “the girls.” And they thought him a “good sort of guy.” He enjoyed popularity; the men he “ran with” liked him, too. He always wanted everybody to have a good time; let everybody “step right in”; it was

"on him." That was Jud Burden, a "good feller," a "mixer," a "spender." He was a law-breaker; but he never broke any "real law." Just one he considered "tommyrot,"—the law protecting plumage. "Mush! Sentiment! A lot of darn-fool *slushiment!* That's what I call this fuss about birds," he'd say. "Gosh-a-liberty! What better use can a bird serve than to set off some pretty woman? Specially when the girls will *pay* so well for it! Suppose we do kill off the species? There'll always be other kinds. Just have to change the style; that's all."

Before the good laws protecting them had been introduced, the beautiful snowy herons had all but gone from Louisiana; their ethereal recurved plumage gracing,—or, better, disgracing,—hats and coiffures of women. And in the same cause, the angelic "great whites" had all been massacred. For a long time, therefore, this field had not been worth Burden's thought. But, now, through Mr. Ned's pioneer haven, the government preserves and private sanctuaries, and the valiant activities of the Audubon Society, and through new laws and an effective and alert Department of Conservation, the birds had found that the protection was real; and were retaking their old homes like a banished people returning to the motherland.

As long as beauty and vanity are inseparables, greed will make it a trio. Through subterranean meannesses, the long, prehensile claws of those who

catered to the weakness of women were reaching into such heronries as had not had sufficient protection. Where wardens were few or lacking, or heronries remote, lawbreakers were "taking a chance," slaughtering.

"The stricter the law," said Burden, "the higher the price of plumes. So we get ours going and coming."

While Burden was in New Orleans for awhile, breaking a business journey to Venezuela,—that chief slaughter-house of herons,—Prowler had chanced to meet him in the street.

This encounter was a great piece of luck for the Prowler, who had hunted herons in the Florida swamps, as a private enterprise, and had once or twice sold to Burden, on that milliner's visits to the beaches, a small illegal batch or two.

"Yes, sir," he told him eagerly, when he had inveigled him into a little brick-floored coffee-house, dark behind green blinds, on a quiet brick-floored alley. "Yes, sir. I went down there thinking maybe I could get a-hold of a few plumes, here and there, to sell to some ladies I know in the business, that I sell 'em to by mail sometimes. Didn't expect to get many, you understand. But—wait—till—I—tell—you!"

Hiding his purpose he had appeared in the parish, he told him, as a migratory laborer,—for he was jetsam and could do a little of everything as he floated along. He had heard there were "cranes"

in the Big Woods around Vermilion Bayou. He had thought it a chance heronry,—away off there so deep in the swamp, accidental and unknown,—until Berne's zeal had become an obstacle to him.

"Then I knew there was something worth getting at, and I heard about her and how batty she was about birds."

He did not tell Burden of Mr. La Grande and the treasure hunt; that was another story and the Prowler's private concern.

But he said that, after some difficulty,—much exaggerated in the telling,—he had located Berne's bird village.

"Six hundred nests, at least, or damme for telling it! If you'll have a car ready, and somebody, so we can make a get-away with 'em, and if you'll stake me along meanwhile, I can fix a good day when nobody's around,—it's far from anywhere; no need for anybody to go in them woods and nobody *does* go, scarcely,—I'll pull it off. And I tell you we've picked up somethin'!"

So it was agreed. But Burden had small hope of Prowler's "getting them out" under Berne's watchful eye; for, ignorant of the treasure-search, he did not know of that double-barreled scheme by which the Prowler hoped to bring about seclusion for both of his projects at once.

Nevertheless, Burden, who prided himself on "never missing a trick," had sent one of his associates down to "look things over," to see what the

prospects were and whether there might not be an opportunity of buying that "neck of swamp,"—if it didn't cost much,—so that, even if they did not get the birds this year; maybe next!

This associate it was who had heard, by chance, Landry's conversation with the Judge in the railroad station that woful morning, and had had the shrewdness to profit by it. Now it looked as if they could own that heronry and, owning it, keep out intruders. No need to tell the Prowler until they had it!

The profits might not be large, as Burden's profits went; but the thing had a spice for him. He liked difficulties; he was vain, wanted to win.

Now Landry was playing into his hand.

"Father," he said, introducing the project at a sign from Burden. "Mr. Burden's visit to us is not entirely a social one."

"Always combine business and pleasure,—my motto! Why not? That's life; isn't it? Business and pleasure. Take 'em both together, I say; get double portion of both. Standing on ceremony doesn't get you anything. That's my idea, Miss La Grande. Am I right or am I wrong?"

Berne regarded him, felt a tingling warning; as the blue herons must feel, she thought, when they lifted their neck-feathers at the premonition of a danger.

Landry explained, "Mr. Burden is interested in a new method,—an untried method, really,—of get-

ting lumber out of the swamp-land, Father; and before he invests in it he wants to buy a piece of swamp where the conditions are the worst possible,—sort of experiment station. So he'd like to buy from us a slice of the Big Woods."

"Willing to pay well for it,—considering what it is,—just idle swamp," said Burden. "Always ready to pay for what I want. You can have strawberries in December if you pay for 'em,—won't be much good though." He laughed. "Of course, I don't want much land,—just a sliver."

"How did you know about the conditions in our woods, Mr. Burden?" asked Berne. "Have you ever been here before?"

"Smart little business head, I'll tell the world! No. Just had some other business with your brother,—'bout some other investments and we got to talking about this place and it sounded right to me. So I sent an expert down to see it and he says it's just the place to try the thing out on,—at least *part* of it is."

"Do you know which part Mr. Burden means?" Mr. La Grande asked his son.

"Yes, sir. Part we can spare best. Over towards Guidry's,—the strip toward Pool of the Moon."

Berne rose angrily to her feet; her father sat upright on the couch. Both were white as wax.

"The treasure! It is known!" Mr. La Grande thought.

"Plumes!" thought Berne.

Neither believed in the timber project. For the first time, Berne was thankful for her father's treasure hunt; it would keep him from this sale.

"So, as Mr. Burden has been very good to me,—a valuable client,—of course, I told him I knew you would—"

Mr. La Grande interrupted him, rather gaspingly. "I regret disobliging a fr—an associate of my son, sir,—and you, too, Landry;—but—I regret—I cannot sell."

"*Cannot!* Why?" Landry cried. "*Why* can't you?"

Berne went to her father, stood behind him, her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh!" Landry exclaimed, struggling for composure. "It's because Camille wants it to play with. Those birds! Is *that* it? Well, I didn't think, sir, you'd go as far as—"

Burden thought it prudent to seize the opportunity for camouflage.

"Birds?" he asked. "Why, surely there must be birds in *all* parts of the woods; not only this. If there's anything there's enough of around here, it's perches for sparrers; I'll tell the world."

"I regret, sir," Mr. La Grande repeated. "That strip is not for sale."

Burden thought he understood the situation. This gentleman wasn't as slow as he looked; he was holding out for a price. Well, he couldn't offer

much; not feathers enough to be worth it; and besides, they might get suspicious,—just a narrow slice of swamp! But he'd "raise the ante" a little. He was beginning to want this now; opposition always made him stubborn. The price he named was high enough to move Mr. La Grande to astonishment and even Berne could not prevent a sudden vision of ready cash.

Seeing this effect, Burden said to Landry, "I'll go out in the yard and let you people talk it over. Can't expect Mr. La Grande to grab it on the fly, like that. Come on; show me a good place to loaf. Got a hammock?" He drew forth a huge cigar wrapped in gilt paper like a candy.

Landry gave him a magazine and led him toward a hammock; out of hearing.

Once outdoors, Burden lost his geniality. His heavy face grew menacing.

"Look here, young fellow," he said. "You see that he comes across. You said he would. I leave it to you to make good. That's me. That's Jud Burden. I do what I say I can do and I expect the other fellow to go me one better. No alibi is going to go with me. You get me that land. I didn't come down here for the *trip*, you know."

"I'll try to persuade—"

"Don't try. Do it."

As soon as Burden and Landry had gone, Mr. La Grande turned to Berne, in terrible anxiety.

"Do you think—he knows? For, my dear, I didn't tell you. We have found the place!" He lowered his voice. "All the landmarks, beyond a doubt, —nearly. It is Pool o' the Moon. A strange coincidence, his wanting *that*. Nonsense, what he says about getting timber! Any other place would do as well as this. And a wild idea anyway! And offering so fair a price! Oh, *do* you think, my child—"

"No, Commodore. He's not after treasure. That man's after plumes. How could he know about Marcel Narcisse,—he, a Northerner in New Orleans!"

Mr. La Grande's face cleared with immense relief. "Why,—after all,—I don't suppose he could. I'm abnormally excited about it. No; of course, he couldn't." After a moment's silence. "Still, I'll take no chances. If I were only sure two weeks would be long enough for us to find it, I could offer the place to him in three or four. Wonder if he'd wait a month or so, on reasonable assurance, some shaving of the price. It would mean a lot, daughter."

"Commodore! My birds!"

"We'll look into it first, dear. Probably you're fighting shadows, too. Maybe he *has* some wild scheme about getting out swamp timber. I'm not the only over-credulous person on earth." He smiled at her, patted her hand.

"Just now you said it was nonsense."

"Well,—I was frightened, as you are now. It does sound queer. We'll look into it well, Fiammetta. See if he'll wait. And meanwhile—"

"If he will not wait," Berne said. "I shall know he is after the egrets. For in three weeks it will be too late for the best plumage. Father dear, it's only because of *your* plan that I don't ask the authorities. If you betray my birds to—"

"Child! Child! There you have it. It's against the law to kill herons. He wouldn't dare, even if he did own the swamp. Don't let your anxiety blind you, dear."

"I'll inform Mr. Ned and have wardens watch that place day and night, treasure or no treasure, if I think he's after plumes," she continued.

"Flame! My dear! You would threaten—"

"Then be *sure*, dear, or don't sell."

Landry entered, strode to his sister. "So that's it? I heard that, 'Don't sell.' Look here, Camille; you've stood in my way long enough. Always against what's for my good!"

"You *can't* think that!"

"Well," he had the grace to pause, seeing his sister's face. "Well—no. But, now, listen. This man's got me in his grip like *that*. He can ruin me, if he wants to. Maybe you'll have to sacrifice the whole place,—unless you'd let me go under, *hard*. Worse than—well! So now you know. And if you'd let a little piece of swamp timber do it, Camille, I'll—"

A small, sturdy figure that had stood a few moments unnoticed in the doorway, ran between them.

"You'll not do *anything* to my sister," Peter said. "Not while I'm here, you won't." His fists were doubled.

Landry and his father couldn't help laughing. But Berne knelt and put her head on Peter's shoulder, her arms about him.

"What's he doing to you, Sis?"

"Nothing, dearest. Just talking. It's all right. Honest."

"Oh! Then, 'scuse me, Lan." But he glared at his big brother, not quite convinced.

Through the rear door they saw Elodi approaching with an armful of star-lilies and eyes not entirely free from the trace of tears. They pulled themselves together.

The man in the hammock was thinking. He mustn't show too much eagerness. He must look out. That girl was smart as a whip. Better let them think he didn't care and, meanwhile, put the screws on Landry. He was the weak sister, all right. This game was getting to be fun. Looked like they were "on," or why didn't they grab his offer right off? He'd better watch his step. After all, maybe he could do the thing the way he'd first planned, through the Prowler. But too much eagerness now would "queer the whole business."

Beetee came towards him, conducting a young man with a telegram.

"Yonder's de North gentleman; yonder in de hammock," she said to Borel. "You better lemme hand him de dispatch, howsomever; you ain't quite steady on yo' steppers, Mist' Borel. You walks like you has been lappin' up somethin' mo' dizzy dan righteous."

But Borel pushed her aside, swayed before Burden.

"Dis-hyere man done fotched you a dispatch f'um de station," Beetee announced and went back to the fig-tree, loudly grunting disgust at Borel's condition, keeping the men in sight.

It was not a true "dispatch," but a note from Prowler, shrewdly written on telegraph paper, asking for an explanation of Burden's presence. As he read it, Borel waited, drunkenly regarding him.

Burden wrote on the space below, bidding the Prowler go right on with his work and wait for orders from town as usual. He threw Borel a coin.

"Now, beat it," he said.

"Are you the boss?" Borel asked, swaying.

"Yes." The man grinned. "Yes; I am. I'll say I am. Beat it."

"*Immédiatement.* When do we dig?"

"Dig? Oh, run along; you're drunk. Go!"

"Oh! *Monsieur* can talk to me. I'm in on this also; me. He thought he could prevent me to know, but I know well what's buried down yonder at this Pool o' the Moon. *Si! Si!* I'm goin' get

my part, you bet. Oo—ee—yes! I'm wise guy; me."

"Your part of what? What are you talking about? What do you mean,—'buried'?"

"Oh! *You* want fool me too; eh? Well, no! Not so, I think. I heard *Monsieur La Grande* tell his daughter all about it. All! Um-m! I'm lucky boy; me. Up in a tree I was. I heard, me, what they goin' do together, *Monsieur La Grande* and,"—he lowered his voice and pointed a shaky finger at the telegraph-paper note,—"*and him.*"

Burden narrowed his ferret's eyes at him.

"Hum!" he said. "Give me back that note of mine." He jammed the yellow paper in his pocket. "Go down that road slowly, I'll come after you in a minute. I want to talk to you."

"Sure pop? *Monsieur* will come?"

"Sure. Right after you."

He whistled to Beetee in the fig-tree.

"Yassah! Hyere's me," coming on a run.

"If they ask for me, I'm taking a walk down the road a way. Tell 'em not to worry. I'm too big to get lost."

"Couldn't git lost in de dark with such look-at-me clothes on! Lawsee!" Beetee mumbled admiringly. "Dat white gentleman certainly do do hisself up like he loves to shine! But he ain't exac'ly quality-lookin'." Then she giggled. "Ain't nothin' so scrumgeous went down dat road since Black Kasper come tryin' to kiss Singsie, in his new green

suit, and she throwed de kettle o' stewed tomatoes on him. Funny,—him to go traipsin' off by hisself dat-a-way! Well, mind my business! 'Taint none of my funeral. Keep away f'um other folks' funerals; 'cause you cayn't keep away f'um yo' own!"

When Burden returned, looking thoughtful, Berne was amusing Elodi; Landry, in earnest talk with his father.

He came in breezily and was soon engaged in booming banter with Elodi, who devoted herself to him, partly to punish Landry and partly to draw forth the funniest conversational method she had ever heard.

He announced in his big voice, "I'm having a *good* time at your party, with this little lady. Some little wild-rose; I'll tell the world."

"Is that why he speaks so loud?" Elodi wondered. "In order to inform the world?"

"Yessir!" he continued. "Mighty glad I came. And, say, Mr. La Grande! That matter we were talking about awhile back,—don't let it bother you any. If you don't want to do it,—why, it doesn't matter much. I know I seemed mighty keen on it. But I'm a queer sort of a duck." Elodi giggled. "She thinks I'm more like an ostrich—that it? Well, 's I was saying, I'm funny that way. Take notions and want what I want when I want it. Like a woman." He guffawed. "And they *get* what they want; I'll tell the world. But don't let it spoil this party any. 'S all right, anyway it works out."

"Would you consider it later, perhaps?" his host ventured.

"Sure. Sure. Any old time."

Mr. La Grande breathed in relief and shot a glance of reassurance at Landry, another at his daughter.

But Landry was far from feeling reassured. He had received another glance simultaneously, a cutting side-blow from the sharp eyes of the speaker.

As for Berne, she soon went to the telephone and was heard,—for any one speaking there could be clearly heard throughout the ground floor of the old house,—to her father's and brother's astonishment, giving Martin Pinckney in New Orleans a message they knew would delight the Mater.

"Can you come down with my mother tomorrow, Martin? Yes; I should, very much. Yes; it is, highly. No *I* thank *you*, Martin. I was sure that you would."

CHAPTER XIV

THE CROWN OF CYPRESS

BERNE awoke next day to find Singsie beside her bed with the early morning coffee, instead of Tiny, who usually brought it. As Berne drank it, Singsie drew a chair close and sat down beside her with an anxious expression. Berne patted her arm and asked, "Worried, Singsie? What is it?"

"Not exac'ly worried, Missy. Just sort o' considerate. Miss Berne, honey, you knows dat no-'count Reverend dat's three widows?"

"Three times a widower? Jury?"

"Yas'm. Dat's him. Reverend Jury."

"Been courting you again, Singsie?"

"Now, you go along, honey! I ain't *lookin'* at him. Needn't to make eyes at me. Better take dem eyes and send 'em up to God. I sho' ain't got no ambitions to have any man be a widow de fourth time on my account. No'm, Missy. I ain't studyin' about dat Reverend. But he come' around to me-and-ma-Maw's cabin last night, pesterin' me and eatin' hog-and-greens like de church was about to stop his rations. And he say he done met dis-hyere friend of Mist' Landry's," she lowered her voice.

"Mr. Burden?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Met him yestiddy in de grass-road over yonder, talkin' right mysterious with dat white trash, Borel f'um de Salt Mine. I kind o' thought you'd want to know, Missy. Lemme pour you some mo' coffee."

"How did he come to know Borel?" Berne asked and learned of the telegram Beete had seen Borel bring to him.

It seemed strange that Borel had been entrusted with the delivery of a telegram; he had never been before; did not even live in Curéville, and certainly was not blessed with the confidence of his neighbors. And why had he been talking to Burden afterwards? Berne felt that perhaps her suspicions were too alert; nevertheless, she would look into this.

"Tell Uncle Hope to have my horse ready," she said.

She would go to the telegraph office in Curéville.

"I hates to pester you, Missy. Dat old Hope, he fills you full enough with complaints and trimblenations, let alone me to help him. Now, lay down and git you a li'l mo' rest. Reckon it'll rain soon, Miss Berne?"

"I hope so, Singsie. The streams are pretty low."

"Well, it'll rain. Don't worry. It's bound to rain. Always do, sooner or later. De Good Lawd, He'll see to it when He gits around to it. I ain't

never noticed dat worryin' hurried Him any. Time enough yet."

"Thank you. I'm coming right down. Please have my breakfast ready. And explain to Miss Elodi, when she comes down, that I'll be back soon. She'll find a good new book on the window seat. And get her the caramels from my mother's table."

Uncle Hope helped her mount her horse. "Gwine have dat pump fixed today, Miss Berne? Dat no-good gasoline tractor? Onestide is 'most dead, 'twixt de misery in he side and dat up-actin' pump."

"Yes, Uncle Hope. Mr. Jonas is helping again. But if it doesn't rain soon, I'm afraid there won't be anything to pump but brine."

"Don't talk like dat!" old Hope exclaimed. "Let's don't run out to call in trouble. Trouble sho' to wake up when he's called. Dat's what de old folks say. Missy,—” he hesitated.

"Yes, Uncle Hope?"

"I remembers yo' *Grandpère*, back yonder befo' we was free. I was just a pickaninny, me; but right now he come back to ma mind just as plain!"

Berne waited.

"Well, Missy! He was sort of quiet and stiddy and still spoken and—and—slim—and—red-headed. And nothin' never *downed* him, Missy. Nobody never seen dat man down-casted fo' *nothin'*. Done kept up heart no matter what confronted to

him. And he always won out in de end. All de time! Yas, Lawdy! Things always come right in de end fo' Marster Achille. He sot on his horse just de very way I sees you sittin' now. Never gave up—"

"Thanks, Uncle Hope."

Hope's old eyes sparkled to see that she understood him. "Po' chile!" he said as he watched her out of sight. "I sho'ly wish she could be just a li'l missy fo' a spell. Huh! 'De best dog seldom gits de best bone,'—as de old folks' proverb say.' "

At the station in Curéville they told Berne,—showing a neighborly curiosity as to why she wanted to know,—that no telegram had arrived for Mr. Burden on the preceding day, but that he had sent one to the city.

"This young scamp, Borel Veriot, he passed in that dispatch yesterday. He workin' for you now, Miss Berenicia? Oh! 'Cause they say he pass 'most every day to Ile Imaginaire. Hardly ever workin' in Salt Mine any more. And his house, where he lives, that is very far from your place; yes? Good thing you don't employ that Borel, Miss Berenicia. He poach, he drink, he gamble. No good, that boy.—You say *quoi?*"

Berne had to use tact to forestall the friendly inquisitiveness. As *finesse* was never her talent, she discovered little. But that dispatch *was* counterfeit!

She set out to locate Borel. He was still around Curéville, she learned, had been seen, some distance away in the direction of the ferry.

So, down the grass-floored road between the moss-hung forests and across the farm-lands, she rode off to find him.

There were small gray clouds in the distance to the south, over the bay, with a touch of plumbago-blue in them that heartened her. Unless they blew out to sea, it might rain.

She looked anxiously at the rice fields, now like soft green lawns, except where the wind rippled them, revealing their floor of blue water. It was low. Too low. The pool-lagoons where no rice stood were thin as tinfoil; the cardinals flying over them were reflected as in shallow mirrors.

The shovel-men, walking the little dikes, had to use skill now and vigilance, to save the rice-crop and conserve the water. Poor Onestide, with his rheumatism!

She met the winding bayou everywhere and never failed to observe how low it ran among the feathery reeds.

"Well, let's not 'call in trouble'!" At least there was no trace yet about its borders of the blue-topped crab, the little brine-dwelling fish that is the first signal of salt in the stream.

At last, a turn in the road brought her to the ferry over the canal at its broadest, where stood the cotton gin of Gertrude Plantation, a little white

house and store, and, across the stream, a tiny church seemingly alone in the prairie.

A crippled black ferryman, who spoke only "French," waved an unsmiling greeting, and out of the storekeeper's house ran a slender, dark young matron, all welcome.

"Oh, *ma chère!* But how I am glad! Pass in the house. Oh, but yes! Coffee? A glass milk?"

"*Bonjour*, Noalie. How is the little Hampshire?"

"My pig? He is no more *little*, that black-with-white Hampshire pig. He is a nuisance yet. Obar, he want kill him for my fête-day. But I will not. 'No,' I say. 'I want my pig. I rather my pig.' "

Laughing, she led her guest into the cool interior of the blue-painted sitting-room off the store, and left her there with the white-quilted bed and white-covered mantel-piece and the side-board full of colored glass-ware, the flowering begonia in the blue fireplace, the strip of spotless matting, the sacred lithographs and the "pretty" ones and, over the chimney-piece, the pictured cross borne by angels and inscribed with the names of Léole and Lionet and Mathurin and the other sisters and brothers of Noalie who had died in infancy.

It was all as fresh and sweet as if Noalie had guests every day, instead of very rarely.

"They are good nest-makers, Noalie and Obar," Berne thought, watching her hostess in the kitchen

and the little son at her feet impeding her progress. " 'Way off here,—but a nest! Oh, Dan, my dear, my dear, are you going to cost me my nest?" She sighed.

Then she started. That coat on the nail in the corner,—surely it was Dan Bardé's!

She called out, asking Noalie.

"Yes. He is staying here tonight. He is now out on the canal, or in the swamp; went off with Caleb, the fisherman. He is going stay with me and Obar tonight; maybe more nights. He say' he like' here very much."

Dan liked it here very much? He could have joined the fisherman anywhere; better, indeed, on the bayou than here. But it was not for her to investigate Daniel's whims; she had come to inquire about Borel.

"Borel Veriot? Mr. Bardé, he want' find him, too. That's fonny. Oh, yes, *chère*; he goes often in the woods, this Borel, with a strangerman. I don't know, me, what they do. *Tiens!* I suspect they go for gin in some cabin. But—*sais-pas!* You like the milk? Maybe you rather *sasparill*? You think he go for some mischief, *chère?*"

"Hope not, Noalie. I like to know what goes on on Imaginaire, and in our woods. *Do* they go into our woods?"

"And Guidry's. Obar, he say' it."

"Noalie, I suppose it's all right. But if I should

need Obar in a hurry,—to put anybody off, for instance,—he'd come?"

"But for certain!" proudly. "My Obar he is not afraid for any one, *vous savez*. He is big man. One night some tramp' try to get in the cotton-gin—"

"Yes. I heard about it. It was splendid. And, Noalie, I'd just as lief not have anybody know I asked you that."

"*Bien!*" Then very sweetly, "Oh, *chère!* I like very much to help you, Camille Berenicia,—me and Obar and even the baby and the pig!" She laughed.

"I know it, dear. Did you see Borel today? Do you know where he is?"

"I think he go in the swamp. Obar say' it. You can't rest here some?" rather wistfully. It was often lonely at the ferry.

"I'm coming soon for a regular long visit. But it's business today. I'd much rather go craw-fishing with you. *Au 'voir*, Noalie!"

"*'Voir* Camille Berenicia!" She waved her own hand and the baby's after Berne, as she rode past and turned her horse into the wild and winding road that led toward the swamp forest and *L'Ecu des Cypres*, the Cypress Crown Pool.

Berne marvelled that Daniel could be looking for Borel. Noalie must be mistaken.

But Daniel had been looking for Borel. He had

undertaken Odrasse's mission less than half believing it necessary. But yesterday's vigil had made him sure that Berne and her birds,—or, perhaps, more than the birds,—did need guarding. There was some mystery here, some menace. He had seen and heard strange men and hints of strange plans. Today he returned to his "blind" as keenly excited as Odrasse himself.

With his pipe, a magazine and a pocketful of chocolate, he waited on Odrasse's platform at the edge of the Cypress Pool.

Your cypress is a tree of temperament; he can be fragile, coy, blithe and springlike, or stately and reserved; he can be gay or somber, open or mysterious, bright or dark, even awful,—a very poet of trees, taking his tone from his environment, interpreting and intensifying the life about him.

Daniel was learning the tragic aspect of the tree. Now he sat in the dark heart of the swampwood. His platform was in a thicket so dense that he could not have seen a person five feet beyond it. The owls hooting close at hand could not be seen,—to him they were disembodied voices; and the calls of the song-birds were elfin and far. The close-set trees, cypress and tupelo and black-enameled magnolia, rose to titanic heights in whispering silence. Magnificent tangles of vines covered these black-green towers or spanned them into giant screens, majestic canopies, tremendous banners; and eerie

moss swung miles of crepe that fell in ghostlike masses to low branches and the underbrush. The floor of the marsh moved eternally in an uncertain, sibilant rhythm. Sculptured stumps of fallen trees protruded through the tremulous water like spires and domes of sunken cathedrals. Snakes slid into the crevices.

Far off he heard the cry of a "cat." About him blew the intoxicating breath of some hidden flower.

Sun-spots and streaks penetrated the gloom,—waving torches or blinding headlights,—and made the darkness deeper.

But the little open lake itself was bright. Shafts of actual sunlight fell upon the Crown of Cypress Pool.

To this one watery clearing came the hosts of egrets. In the thicket all about were their great nests of twigs; and now every nest was a home; in every one the new-born birds were tended.

Happiness had made their parents' feathers beautiful; the birds still wore their gladsome nuptial plumes; no wedding finery in all the world surpasses this in ecstatic purity.

It is the fidelity of these parents to their young that often becomes their doom. If hunters came for the herons while they were merely lovers, the first assault would drive the birds far away. But egrets will not desert their helpless young; they keep returning to the nest, making themselves easy tar-

gets; so the plume-hunters come when the babies do. That is why the egrets are destroyed,—through their loyalty and their love.

Dan, watching the life of the hundreds of nests, hour by hour, in this quiet place, was learning. He began to understand what Berne had meant. Every creature about him,—the spider, the ant,—was making safe its home. The air was soft with fans of wings all day long. Dan was young. His health was returning. He was in love. And everything around him was making safe its home. A flame was kindling.

He was going to have a nest, too. He dared to dream it.

Suddenly he laughed. Even in this tender mood of romance and dawning ambition, he laughed at the thought. If his mother had known to what she was sending him! After shielding him safely through girls of all nations, so that never the shaft of a bright eye pierced her guard!

Poor little mother! He winced. But what a girl!

To build a nest for her!

Easy to dream! But where, how, when? Ask her to wait down here indefinitely, toiling and worrying, for the prospect of some day owning *him*? Scarcely. A pretty unsportsmanlike thing, though, to stay here just to trouble her. He'd clear out and—he grinned—collect twigs. Then, if he found he *could* build a nest, he'd come back, take his

chance. Would his red-top have spread her wings and flown by that time? Take a long day to gather twigs enough to build in the trees of Ile Imaginaire!

Well, he'd do it if he could. In the meantime, he wasn't going to make love to her. Fair field!

Suddenly he stopped dreaming, sat up, alert.

The sound of a paddle!

Was Borel, or were the other men he had seen yesterday returning? It was too early for Odrasse.

He sat as still as a creature of the forest.

The *piroque* must be approaching behind him. He dared not look around for fear of betraying his presence. He heard the boat drawn up into the bushes. Not Odrasse ahead of time; Odrasse would have spoken.

There was now a step along the path that led to his platform. The bushes behind him were pushed aside.

He turned sharply.

"Flame! My dear!"

"*Gai-Da!*" Berne cried in astonishment. "What are you doing here?" as he rose to meet her.

He looked at her a moment quizzically. "Keeping the nests safe, Flame."

"Oh!"

A wave of joy swept over her; she grasped his hands, standing close to him. Then he kissed her, as inevitably and unthinkingly as the birds billed in their season.

She drew away from him, without embarrassment, but her eyes full of tears.

"Forgive me, Flame! I couldn't—" he cried; what a travesty, his resolution of that moment!

"It's all right, Da. I understand. It's no matter. Why need it matter? I'm glad. We shall always have—this. And it's over."

Berne could not pose, play a rôle, even to herself. It would not have done, this kiss, if it had been intended, planned for. But it had happened of itself. They had it. She was glad.

She still spoke a little pantingly; her cheeks were still flaming; she asked, "Why did you come here? How did you know? Odrasse?"

"Flame! I cannot,—I can't just pass this thing by, like that."

"It is by, Da."

"No. I haven't your self-control. Or maybe I care more than you do."

Berne smiled.

"But I've *got* to face this thing. Just now I swore I'd never bother you. And now!"

"I took you by surprise, Da. Never mind."

"No. I won't dodge. I won't. Sit here. Let's diagnose." He tried to smile.

They sat on the platform, spoke in low tones, though there was nobody but the birds to hear.

"I love you, Flame. I never cared for any girl before enough to be disturbed by it. I know you'll believe me."

She nodded. She knew it was true.

"Maybe I was too selfish to care. I've been having a look-see at myself out here,—complete survey of a young dud! I'm not edified, *Berenicia mia*. Maybe I've been too selfish; but maybe I've just been—waiting. Does that seem fantastic to you, dear?"

"No."

"Then there was the inhibition of my mother. She's very young and pretty, even now—"

"Like mine."

"Yes. My father was very much older and she was left a girl-widow, with me. We both liked to play. Couple o' kids. Together all the time. Lots of men wanted her and I used to be cruelly jealous for fear she'd marry. She knew it and sort of played it up—Oh, innocently!—to make me love her more."

"I know. Mater flirts with Lan and Pete."

"Well, I nearly died of it. One time especially. I adored her. And she never did marry and pretty soon the tables were turned and what I used to feel about her I think she feels about me. So I played with all the girls, but didn't—specialize. But I'm not naturally a 'coupler' anyway, so it was never a sacrifice. Maybe that's why I fall so hard now. I sho' do love you, chile. I live in a sort of a glow of you. But—I'm no good to you. I couldn't be any good to you,—here. The conditions. I'm dying to beg you to marry me,—but! You *wouldn't*

leave here,—try me? No,” as she shook her head. “I know you couldn’t, even if— I can’t do without you and I can’t have you. What shall I do, Flame? I’m not selfish enough to ask you to wait.”

“I’d like you to be some good to *yourself*, Da. No need to ask me to—marry you,”—she was very white,—“because I wouldn’t,—dear. Even if you had money enough to release me from my job here, I wouldn’t, Da. I wouldn’t marry you.”

He smiled ruefully. “Then I’m glad I kissed you. For I’ve had a kiss and you’ve lost nothing. You don’t really care for me, honey. And I reckon I ought to be glad.”

“Oh! I do! Ever since we were little and used to lie out there on a *mêche* in the *savane* and dream brigands.” Their eyes clung. “But I’m going to try to stop it.”

“Flame! Yes; you’re right. Try. You don’t care, though, old girl. All right, say your say; and then *I* want to tell *you* something.”

“I’m trying to stop it because I want a nest, Da. With a—nest-builder. Even after I had saved Ile Imaginaire for Pete and fixed it so that Commodore wouldn’t have to worry all the time and try business ventures that fail, there’d surely be tasks in life. I want a man who’ll like lifting loads, like the *work* of it. Like to work. I shouldn’t feel the nest safe else. Just money wouldn’t do it.”

“And you think *I* shouldn’t enjoy—all that?”

She read his hurt. “You’re a boy Daniel. Some

ways, you're younger than Odrasse. You're a playmate,—a dandy one!" She smiled. "Not only your mother's; everybody's playmate. Everybody likes you to be so. The fishermen are all crazy about you. Mme. Le Blanc even lets you use her precious loom. You play their games. Even over in France, it was a gorgeous terrible game to you. That's all right, dear, for a playmate—only. Some day, you'll stop playing, with your mother, with your life, with—love. Maybe you'll grow up and know— But you're not *well* yet," she said with quick compunction. "A lot of it is just that, perhaps. Anyway, you see, it's not your coming that made me care. So don't regret. *I've* always waited."

"It is a wonder you didn't stop caring when the—play-boy came."

"But I didn't, Da. So! I've been hurting your feelings!" She looked at him sorrowfully.

He put out his hand, withdrew it quickly. "Yes'm; you do hurt. Like the dickens. But now, my lady, you listen to me. I'm not going to plead for myself. You've said—said you wouldn't marry me nohow." He smiled wryly. "So that's that. It lets me out. No! I'll be dashed if it does! But, anyhow, it lets me out of *your* calculations—for the present. But, my dear," his voice deepened. "Maybe I'm not—a man, a worker, a lifter and all that," he tried not to let her see how sorely his pride was touched. "And maybe again I am,

—but haven't got my gait yet. But, Flame, old girl, this to you: You *need* a playmate more than anything. And I'll be hanged if I don't think the poor old, weary world does, too. Suppose it *was* a gorgeous game Over There,—we *played* it! And, by jinks, the stakes were high. Maybe that's why we got through it pretty well,—because we *did* play the game, like a game. And I don't mind saying, young lady, me love, that if *you'd* try looking at life a little bit more like that—as a game—it wouldn't make it any harder for you."

"Dan,—are you angry?"

"B'ilin'!" He smiled, but he *was* angry and she knew it. "B'ilin' mad. But you had to say what you thought. So that's that. And it's over. Go wed whom you will, what care I how fair she be, and weep no more, gentlemen!" He tossed his head back and returned to his characteristic happy manner.

Berne's heart was troubled. But he was right,—there was no more to be said.

She squared her shoulders and went on in her calm, clear voice, "Now tell me why you are out here, please, Da, and what has happened."

Losing the strain of the situation little by little, he told her of his vigil, of how he had at first—he said it teasingly—just "played Odrasse's game," not believing in it. But those men had come, one of whom he now knew to be the youth, Borel; and he had heard them talking plainly of "doing" her

father. Perhaps Odrasse was right. It looked as if there were "something up."

"They said nothing about plumes?"

Nothing that he'd heard. The men had gone far off in the direction of the dry woods, into that blackest blackness, "the place that would stump Dante," he said; out of the swamp, he believed.

"To the Pool o' the Moon," said Berne with relief. There were no birds in there and she did not believe in the treasure. But if they were trying to "do" her father!

"You will watch, Dan, a little longer? It's good of you. And let me know if anything happens?"

"You and my boss, Odrasse. Why don't you tell your Great Gentleman, Flame; if you think they're after birds?"

She flushed deeply. "Oh! How I want to tell Mr. Ned! But my father doesn't believe they're interested in the birds at all, and—he has—other reasons for not telling anybody."

Mr. La Grande was sensitive to the opinions of even the most trusted friends; they would think this the maddest of his visionary adventures. Wait until it succeeded!

"I'm going to ask him to tell you and Odrasse his—reason, though. Your having heard what you did makes an opening." He might not feel the same reluctance as to these youths, she thought, especially if they offered no opposing opinions. She would try to make him want their protection. He

—or her birds—might need it. “He’ll need you, perhaps, even if there is no treasure there.”

“*Treasure!* Buried treasure! Gee!” Daniel exclaimed, all excitement. He *was* a boy. Peter could not have been more thrilled. He laughed at himself, realizing it.

Berne was sorry for the slip of tongue. “Oh, no! There isn’t any, really. I feel sure. I’d no right to tell you. I’d *promised*. So please forget it, Da.”

“Forget it? Forget it? A treasure hunt! La-fitte, perhaps? When I was a boy they used to say—Oh, all right, dear. Don’t worry. I’ll *try* to forget it. And, of course, I’ll not mention it. But, please, *please*, let me in on it, Flame, if you can; whether it’s true or not!”

She promised, rising.

“You’re better, Da; aren’t you? A month ago—”

“Nothing could have roused me like this? That’s so. Though nobody ever tried a treasure hunt. Not going away, now,—heart o’ me?”

“Ssh! I must get back to Elodi. And this afternoon Martin Pinckney is coming with my mother.”

“Again?”

“I sent for him. I want him to find out something for me in the city, and I need his advice.”

“A man—to help lift, Flame?”

“Please, Da!”

"But you do prefer the *birds!*"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"*They* give you what you really need. Wings. Think it over."

"Dan, I'm sorry if I—"

"Go on, Flame. You go on and toil and let me play my little game of sentinel. Hist! Who goes there? Password, sirrah! The word is Berenicia. Pass, friend!"

She laughed and sighed. "Dan, dear! I'm sorry."

She slipped into her *piroque* and away.

When he saw that she was quite gone, he brushed his hand across his eyes.

And as the sound of her paddle diminished, ceased, the sound of men's voices reached Daniel, from the direction of that blackness in the midst of which glimmered the Pool of the Moon.

CHAPTER XV

LANDRY TAKES NO BLAME

SOON after Berne left home Odrasse arrived there, looking for her, to confess having commissioned Daniel as guard of the heronry.

But the reason for his visit mattered little, for Odrasse found a new one daily for consulting Berenicia. He took a grim pleasure in making himself suffer.

He dashed over on Vitesse early this morning, but too late for Berne.

Elodi had arisen early, too. She had slept well despite her grief at having quarreled with Landry and had come downstairs, pretty as the morning, in the hope of a before-breakfast reconciliation. Landry had not yet appeared; and Elodi, romantic as she was, turned her practical Créole-Acadian eyes upon the house and grounds, regretting the run-down details, understanding the poverty that caused them; without bashfulness planning what repairs could be made with her Papa's gift or her own dowry.

She enjoyed her misery over the quarrel with Landry, feeling sure now that it was about to end, —perhaps in magical fulfilments.

But when Landry did appear, he waved her a cheerful good-morning, as though there had never been a quarrel. No apology. No regret. He had simply forgotten the trouble. And she had cried about it!

Then he asked the servants anxiously whether his father had come down, and waited at the staircase a few impatient moments.

When, at last, he spoke to Elodi, it was only, lightly ignoring her coldness, to tease her about her conquest of that "white-face negro-minstrel," as Elodi privately called Burden.

"Drive the poignard of your bright glance home, Elodi! Every day is a fresh beginning, you know. Here comes the victim."

"I am nice to him only because he is your friend, *s'il vous plaît*. My friends are not so fortunate with you, but at the least they are—" she stopped; politeness halted her chagrin.

Landry raised his brows. "Oh! Still rankles; eh? That about Odrasse? Silly child! Accept my profound regrets!" He bowed low. "I apologize. Is that enough?"

Elodi was exasperated by this surface apology, plainly insincere; but could do nothing but accept it. This was not the *amende* she had hoped for. Still, she lifted her soft eyes, reproachful, forgiving and sweet.

Landry admired them but was more conscious of Burden's gaze than of hers. He called to him,

"Good morning, Mr. Burden!" and said to her casually, "Coming in to breakfast with us, Elodi? Or waiting for my father?"

"I'll wait for your father."

"Had your coffee, of course? *A bientôt*, then! Come in, Mr. Burden."

"Morning, Miss Huval!" Burden clamored. "Sorry you won't join us. I'd wait with you,—glad to, you bet!—but I smell corn-bread. O you Loos-yanner corn-bread, I hear you ca-a-ll-ing me!" he shouted. "And I'm answering quick; I'll tell the world." He hastened into the dining-room whence she soon heard his chortles of joy at the sight of an *omelette soufflée*.

It was just as Elodi, pitying herself not a little, turned toward the gate that Odrasse alighted from Vitesse and came toward her. Odrasse, about whom she had had this trouble with Landry!

There were tears in her eyes. Odrasse saw them and cried out solicitously in tender French, "What hast thou, Dodi? What hast thou, then?"

"Nothing."

Odrasse had never seen Elodi other than blithe and conquering; it moved him strangely to see her tears.

Elodi looked at him critically. He had taken off the overseas cap, revealing damp curls sticking to a shiny forehead; for the morning was warm and Odrasse had been riding hard. His brown blouse was

wide open across his bronzed chest, where a daub of marsh mud had splashed.

"Is that the way you come visiting Berne, Toto?" asked Elodi.

"Visiting? What way?" in surprise.

"All sticky and muddy like that. Your shirt wide open so. Not a neck-tie. Your shoes so—"

"Why, Dodi!" he repeated, though with changed meaning. "What hast thou, Dodi?" And then, laughing, "I'm not visiting. I'm going to work. Berne understands. She wears work-clothes, too, in the morning."

"Without sleeves! Your arms so—"

"What's the matter with that?" looking at them. "*Grand'mère* always cuts 'em short and hems 'em that way. It's cooler. What's the matter with you, *chère*? You're not crying because you don't like my clothes?"

"I'm not crying at all. And why should I distress myself about your appearance,—especially if Berne likes it. Only I don't desire my friends to look like—'rubes'. That is all."

He laughed. "But I *am* a rube. Why not? I know I look like a farmer, because that's what I am."

"*Eh, bien!* If you like it, why should I bother to defend you?"

"*Defend?* From whom?" belligerently.

Elodi began to cry.

Odrasse was disarmed. "Have I said something to hurt you? Did I speak too sharply? *Awful* sorry if I did, Dodi! But you puzzled me so,—about my clothes. I'll go right away if you don't like to look at me," smiling tolerantly. "That's all right. I wish you wouldn't cry, Dodi."

"I don't want to look at *any* men," said Elodi; and Odrasse saw a light. It was Landry.

"If anybody makes you cry and you want I should smash him!" he doubled his fists. "I rather a rube than a dude. I—"

"Don't be stupid, Toto. Nobody's done anything." But he had made her feel better. "I have a headache. Will you take me home?"

"I have only Vitesse, *chère*. No wagon. A Mexican saddle!"

"Well, my aunt, Mme. Boutin, is driving to Mme. Le Blanc for artichokes this morning. Will you leave word she should pass for me? I want her to bring me home. Oh! Berne's gone already," seeing him look about.

So Odrasse, disappointed at not seeing Berne, went on Elodi's errand.

"That Landry *did* make her cry," he said to himself resentfully. Then, "How she did scold me! Wonder if I do look so bad? Dodi's pretty, even when she cries. I could, too, smash him if he makes her cry! She must like him, though, to cry."

Mr. Burden would not let business cloud his radiant breakfast hour; so, while he ate, he regaled

Landry with a hearty cordiality that did not deceive him, told him jests fresh tossed from vaudeville circuits, himself guffawing at "the latest" about Fords, prohibition, domestic infelicities. Landry, naturally fastidious, tried not to show his distaste and covered his unresponsiveness by renewed proffers of the smooth, cool, white cheeses, submerged in clotted cream.

Burden finally pushed back his chair, beamed upon Tiny and Beetee, who were serving, and bade them, "Tell the cook that's some little breakfast, or Jud Burden's another! Some little feed, I'll tell the world! Say! They won't believe in that cream-cheese up North when I tell 'em. Ought to see the grainy stuff *we* call cream-cheese. Certainly do live high down here. I bet you eat as long as you can keep awake, and then dream about grub!" he said to Beetee.

Tiny and Beetee chuckled with such warm appreciation that Burden was flattered. But, as soon as he had gone out through the rear door with Landry, big Tiny said to little Beetee, "*He ain't no gentleman. He ain't nobody!*" and Beetee replied with a naughty grin, "I'll tell de world!"

Once outside with Landry, Burden dropped his geniality.

"Well?" he asked gruffly. "Old man coming through?"

My father? I'm afraid not. I tried. You see, I'd be as glad as you can be; more so, I'm sure;

for, after all, you *can* get other lands for your purposes, and it would mean a good deal to me just now to sell that swamp at the figure you named."

"H'm." Burden thought, "Are you as big a fool as you sound, or are you trying to fool *me*? Any other lands do me as well! A lot they would!" And to Landry he said, "I want to tell you something. You can keep your mouth shut?"

Landry flushed, made no answer.

"I'm talking business now. Answer me. Will you swear not to tell a living soul what I'm going to tell you about my business?"

"Your business? Certainly."

"You give me your word of honor?"

"Scarcely necessary. Well,—I do, of course."

"I'm in the wholesale millinery business."

"So? But why is that a secret? God! Egrets!"

"Sure. Took you a long time to get on. Your sister got it first crack. Smart kid, that kid! Darn little nuisance! Well, there's a neat little pile o' money in that strip o' woods right now. Not enough to make the government worry about a man's income,—but every little bit added to what you got makes just a little bit more. Anyway, there's *something* in it. If I can own that patch of woods, I'll put up 'keep out' signs and my own wardens,—fake, of course. And some fine day,—blooie! And who'll know?"

Landry was dead white. "Too bad you told me."

"*What?*"

"Because now I can't let my father sell the swamp-wood, of course. It's against the law,—the birds."

"You hypocrite! A lot you care for the law or the birds. Too bad I told you, huh? If I hadn't told you, it would-a been all right. I've got your number all right, my lad. Now, listen here. I get those woods or you pay up those advance commissions to the people that gave 'em to you. 'Cause I'm *not going to buy those securities.*"

"But you *have* bought them!" Landry shouted. "You've bought them."

"Got anything to show for it?"

"You told me to go ahead, collect the commissions from my friends to meet my notes; you'd guarantee to sign tomorrow. You understood thoroughly. You assured me—"

"Changed my mind. Gosh-a-liberty! Man's got a right to change his mind. All you got to do is to give back the money."

Landry was livid. "You—you—"

"Better not call me names. Used the money; did you? Other fellers' money; borrowed it under false pretenses. That ought to be against the law—is it?—like killing a few birds."

"That's a lie. I didn't! You promised!"

"Sure, it's a lie. I'd just as lief say I never told

you I'd take the securities. Only considerin' 'em. You were just a little premature."

"And you expect me to keep *my* promise to you!"

"Yes, sir. The sooner you tell, the sooner your bomb'll bust. Also I've bought that note of yours; you remember. You thought I was doing it just to protect you; didn't you? Well, I was,—you and me, too. Oh! It wasn't any *luck* that brought us together, you poor boob! It was Jud Burden being on the job. My partner overheard your tale of woe in the railroad station that day. And I acted *pronto*. Now, do we talk turkey?"

Landry saw the world fall at his feet; but vain and spoiled and light as he was, he had the ultimate quality in some degree at least. He choked like a weeping girl; but said, "No. We don't sell. Do —what you want to."

"It'll drag down the whole caboodle; won't it? Down goes the baby, plantation and all! Better think it over."

"No. We don't sell."

"Then your game's up."

"Yours, too. I'll put guards in the heronry, and report your threats about plume hunting."

Burden regarded Landry keenly. He had not expected this. He certainly had "pulled a boner," laying his cards on the table this way. He thought he'd read Landry better. Thought he had him. Time was short for the herons. And he'd hate to give up his little scheme with Borel for punishing

the Prowler,—and others,—in that treasure business. “Getting even” was as great a passion as getting rich to this man; and getting what he wanted, *winning*, was the greatest passion of all. Now he’d “spilled the beans”!

Well, maybe.

His booming laugh rang out, startling Landry. He clapped his shoulder. “Well, well! I guess I ain’t so hard-hearted, after all. I like spunk. Didn’t think you had it in you. All right. I’ll take the securities, I guess, after all. Next week. I *guess* I will. I’m darn sure I will. And I’ll give up buying the land, too; I’ll go back to town today. Give it all up. Gosh-a-liberty! These ain’t the only birds in the world. It’s O. K. We’ll go back where we started. You got the best of me and I lost my temper. All right. I know when I’m done. Nobody ever said Jud Burden was a poor loser,—after he’d got his temper back. Those stocks are good and I guess I’ll take ’em. I’ll go to N’Yawlins today. That car here yet you brought me over in?”

“Yes. I hired it for a while.”

“Take me over to Lafayette in it can you? I’ll get the next train out. And you can tell the old man the deal’s off.”

Landry almost swooned with relief; yet he now had this man’s “number,” too. He could not quite believe what he was saying.

“Seems too good to be true? Well, I’m that

way. Impulsive. See you in the city. And, say! Now it's off, you'll keep your mouth shut about what I told you,—what I meant to do,—if I *had* bought the swamp?"

He hooked his sharp eyes in Landry's.

"Of course," Landry began; and then he understood. Perhaps this man still had designs on the birds!

"If anything special's done out there, new guards put out—or anything,—I'll know it; I've had a man of mine down here for some time. Of course, I'll know you've been talking; broken your word to me. And then we can't do business."

"But you say you've given it up! Then why should you care?"

"Sure, sure. But I don't want it known what I *was* going to do,—and not getting the birds anyway! Well, I guess nothing doing on that. You promised. And you'll keep your word. Get me? I won't have anybody warned."

But was not eye saying to eye, "I'm going to get the birds. But you're not supposed to know it. This lets you out"?

Landry could not be sure. He chose not to try to read Burden's eyes. After all, why conjecture? He'd been heroic enough. If anything happened, it wasn't his fault now. Didn't the plantation out-value the birds? He had the man's word and he'd given his own. And how could he dare shoot, without owning the heronry?

"If you've really given up the project, I'll forget all about it."

"Thanks," sardonically. He stalked off. "I'll go pack up. Won't keep you waiting."

Landry sat down on a bench and settled his emotions before going in to Elodi and his father.

If Camille had attended to business and not gone off on this crazy fad about bird-sanctuaries, all this might never have occurred. Or if she had let their father give him that money, instead of sinking it out here! Whatever happened, it wasn't his fault. He'd held out all he could. Perhaps he was saving the plantation, too! And Burden had *said* he'd given up all idea of getting plumes. Probably he meant it.

As he rounded the house, Landry saw Elodi ready to go home.

His nature was not deep; he welcomed the relief of the meeting.

"Going away?" he asked her in affected reproach.

"Yes," coldly. "A headache. *Tante* is coming for me."

He drew her into the arbor. "*Be* sweet to me!" he said. "What's wrong now?" gently accusing.

Elodi weakened. "You were rude to my friend, and assumed what you had no right to assume; and you were not truly sorry."

Landry looked at her with an appealing air of injured innocence. "You imagined the whole thing,

child," he said. "But I guess you were just tired and cross. Let's make up!" forgivingly. "An olive branch!" He pulled a spray off of the sweet-olive shrub outside a "window" of the bower and fastened it over Elodi's ear.

She liked the little ceremony and smiled at him again. But she was not really satisfied. She clung to her resolution to go home.

She told her *Tante* Boutin about it, as they jogged along the uneven road in the little Ford car that Mme. Boutin drove proudly and badly; told her with wistful eyes fixed on the distant dust of the larger car that was bearing Landry and Burden to the station in Lafayette.

"You avoid to fall in love with that young La Grande," her *Tante* advised. "I have told you so before this time. I do not think he is sarious in his attention'. But, even if yes; you attend well my word', *mignonne*. There is more pleasure to a woman in a man who beat her with a stick, *ma chère*, and is then 'orrible sorry and confess it to her and implore her to forgive him, than in a perfect gentleman who hurt' her feelings and put' the blame on *her*. You attend! It is true what I tell. Beware the man who never apologize', who never say, 'I have wrong.' You pass by a million dollars. Say, 'No,' if he have it. But if one has to offer nothing but this idea,—'If I hurt her I *must* be wrong, because she give herself mine to keep her happy,' grab him *quick* and thank the *Sainte Vierge*

who protect all good girls. You listen, Elodi!"

Odrasse waved to them across the *savane*. Mme. Boutin gave her niece a sidelong glance; then sighed.

In the early afternoon, Landry and Jud Burden arrived at Lafayette, Burden to go to the hotel and "hang around" until time for the "down train," he said; Landry to wait at the railroad station for the earlier train that should bring his mother and Martin Pinckney from the city.

Burden had boomed jovially all the way, leaving many messages for Berne, making no further reference to the graver matters between them.

Maybe he was sincere, Landry kept telling himself; perhaps he, Landry, didn't understand this sort of fellow. Unscrupulous, vulgar,—but not a cold-blooded liar, surely! Still!

The train from the city slowed down and a man dropped off. Landry thought he recognized him; but turned his back before he could be sure it was Burden's partner. He did not try to make sure, waited a little to let the man pass, before he went back to look for Mater and Martin,—a futile and involuntary act of cowardice, like shutting one's eyes to ward off a blow.

He was unusually silent driving home with the others. The thought disturbed him: Should he warn Odrasse or Camille or Mr. Ned, give them a hint as to guarding the heronry? But, after all, he was not sure that Burden meant to break his word,

—and, if he did not, he had Landry's own word to be silent. And the risk he took in giving warning would be as great as that of the birds through his silence. More important to them all, besides. Still!

He'd sleep on it, decide by morning. Nothing could be done that afternoon, anyway. His decision would keep until next day.

He was afraid his inherited qualities were winning over his prudence; he was afraid he was going to be Quixotic, to tell. Well, let him have one day's respite anyway!

That respite would have been slight indeed, if he could have seen,—while he, driving his mother and Martin Pinckney home, was turning his car into the bumpy back-road between Curéville and Ile Imaginaire,—the train to New Orleans pulling out of Lafayette without Jud Burden.

That gentleman sat beside his partner on the shaded sidewalk before Lafayette's hotel that afternoon, in one of a long fleet of swaying rush rockers, with sails of newspapers and magazines, until the Prowler appeared across the street.

Prowler came according to orders brought to him the day before by Borel Veriot, who had leered and laughed in drunken, secret triumph as he handed him the "boss's" note.

When they saw the Prowler, the two arose and followed him under the trees of the umbrageous little town, followed so far that Burden demurred

at last, "Gosh-a-liberty! Where's he taking us? Don't he know it's hot? I ain't a salamander."

The line of trees had stopped at a last fine hackberry; now the unshaded road stretched dusty white into a poor quarter of clean, bare cottages, behind hedges of shabby-gay hollyhocks; a quarter now seemingly deserted and asleep.

Prowler turned into one of these cottage yards. A barefoot girl in one garment opened the door to a cool, scrubbed pine interior.

"Ain't nobody home. All workin' but me," she said.

The men sat down to talk. They spoke at length; but what would have troubled Landry most was impressed on the others by Prowler.

"I say *to-morrow*," said he. "Chance of a lifetime. Everybody's going off to a picnic and barbecue. Everybody,—niggers and all. Chance of a lifetime. You two can get off now on the next train to New 'Leans and the rest of us—me and them boys of mine,—can slip in the woods before daylight. Some from the canal side, some from the road by the bayou. I got it all fixed. We can fire away all morning,—all day, if we have any luck; and if anybody does come along, we've got it all fixed for a get-away. But nobody ain't going to come. You see," he turned to Burden. "Like I told you before, nobody hardly ever goes 'way in there anyway, except that girl; nothing to go for. And a few shot guns and twenty-two-rifles can do a lot in no

time. But, with everybody off in the other direction, nobody's likely to hear us even from a distance. Besides some silencers! Oh, it's a cinch."

"Miss La Grande going away, too?"

"No. Got *you* scared, too; has she? But that's the best of it. She's going to have company from the city; I heard her dad let it out to the servant. She's going to sort o' take a day off. To-morrow's the time. Nobody'll be near them swamps all day!"

Meanwhile Landry was repeating to himself that he'd do nothing for that day anyway. He was too unstrung for serious decisions. Maybe he would drive into Curéville towards evening and win back Elodi's smiles.

CHAPTER XVI

BLACK WINGS OF WARNING

MARTIN PINCKNEY had, as they say "in the parishes," entered life by the "*porte dorée*," and the golden doors had led to pleasant paths.

He had accepted his charming life in a charming manner, always quietly occupied with his business affairs, but not too much occupied to give himself gracefully to many pastimes. He had never taken the work or the play too seriously, but had done both well. He was generous; all "causes" knew where to find him; he was a small patron of the arts and a mild enthusiast about the preservation of the old "quarter" in New Orleans. He lived on the surface of life but not superficially; he was completely sincere and earnest as far as he went.

Defended by clean tastes and a whimsical sense of humor from the snares that surround rich young men, too modest to expect girls to succumb easily to his personal equipment, he was tolerant and understanding of the maternal solicitude that tried to steer daughters to his money and position; yet, too wary to be caught in that way, he remained the desirable bachelor of the city.

He had kept his word to Berne and was her friend.

It was not easy to be an attentive friend to her without raising false assumptions in the mind of Mater. But he had managed to send Berne farm papers and even implements and other practical gifts and to combine them with books and candy and pictures and the young-lady tributes that Berne received so seldom.

She accepted all gladly, simply taking the pledge of friendship at its face value, and asked his advice and guidance when she needed them, as now.

This position of friend was difficult for Martin; because he loved her now. But he was not without hope of her, either.

They were walking by fragrant, flowery paths, active with wings of red-shouldered black birds and the soaring rainbows of dragonflies, toward Curéville, where Berne had an errand. It was the golden end of the afternoon; the sweet perfumes lingered, though the sun that inspired them was no longer high.

"It's a longish walk; not too warm for you?" Berne asked. "We can ride in with Landry, if you'd rather. He's going to make a call." But Martin liked the walk, he said.

She was apologetic for having brought him from town, now that Burden had departed.

"I've brought you here on a false alarm; but I'm glad you came. That man you saw going away,—

or did you see him? More probably *heard* him! Landry took him to the train,—came here with a wild scheme, so impossible that I got suspicious. Wanted your keen eye, Martin.” She told him of Jud Burden’s strange offer and of how she had feared for her birds.

“I suppose it’s getting to be an obsession with me, like Cousin Délice who always thinks robbers are coming for the Empress Eugenie’s ormolu clock. She’s even taken it to bed with her and was afraid to move for fear of its falling out. But his project sounded so ridiculous that even my father doubted it. And he’s not—” she hesitated.

“Distrustful of mankind?” Martin suggested.

They laughed.

She told him of the counterfeit telegram. “Of course, that *might* have been some business of his own.”

“And in these prohibition days, many have secret missions.”

“Anyway, I wanted you to size up the man for me, talk to him, and then get somebody in the city to find out his real business. But he’s gone.”

“And I’m here. My stars were on the job. But I am sorry not to serve you, child.”

“You’re so good to me, Martin! You can tell me something, though, if you care to, frankly. Martin, is Landry—wise? On the Exchange? And—generally?”

"Afraid not, Berne. But he's young and not stupid. He'll learn."

"You've been such a good friend; will you be even better?"

"I want to be the best, Berenicia." She raised grateful eyes; but his were veiled.

"If you could guide him a little,—watch, perhaps! He's worried, I think. He is very young—"

"And, therefore, very sure of himself. I've tried, and will again. But Landry is never keen about being advised; is he?—Berne, look at me!"

She lifted frank eyes to him. "Yes, Martin?"

"That's all. Just wanted to see them," and still smilingly holding them with his own, he suddenly asked, "Where's young Bardé?"

He did not hear her reply. "I thought so," he was saying to himself. "But I mean to give him a run for it."

Berne's business was with Judge Julien Le Boeuf, whom they found walking in his well-kept, shady garden, with General Bardé.

"*Entrez!* Come in!" he invited them, with his graceful, courtly gestures. "You see, I have just plucked this rose for you, my child. Before you arrived. A presentiment; eh?"

"You're a courtier, *Oncle Jubat*. But it isn't a bit wonderful that you can guess I'm coming; I bother you so often with my affairs. May I have a little moment with you soon, on business?"

"What a lovely place!" Martin exclaimed, regarding the brilliant patchwork of old-fashioned flowers.

"It is the artistry of *madame*, my wife, sir," the Judge said, giving a sprig of mignonette to Martin. "Her life is centered in her flowers and the church. It is due to her love of flowers that my daughters are talented,—with the needle and the pianoforte. My daughter, sir, could play the piano before she could talk; and that"—with a twinkle—"is pretty soon for a *girl*!"

The General exchanged a glance with Berné; the Judge was launched on his beautiful devotions. "Flowers and the church, sir! What a soul that implies! Her religion, I assure you, is equal to that of Charles the Fifth, who left the throne for a monastery." His fine dark face glowed, he tossed back his long white hair.

"Now, if you care to see *my* garden,—my own!" He led them to the vegetable patch back of the house. "It is a War garden," he laughed. "It was planted in 1862!" And when they had admired it, "Will you entertain yourself in the parlor, sir, with General Bardé? My daughters will come home soon. And you wish to consult me on business, Camille Berenicia Marie?" He led her away, excusing himself to Martin with one of his expressive gestures.

Left with Martin, General Bardé began immediately, "He is so proud of his family; but so

modest of himself! A wonderful man! It was he who started our school system here, *monsieur*. He is an admirable jurist. And an orator beyond—”

The Judge turned at the distant sound of his friend's voice; his eyes were merry; he knew he was being celebrated.

“Tell *monsieur* how the Democrats sent me North to address the miners in 1891 and how, thereafter and therefore, the Republicans will always employ me—to speak for the Democrats!” he called, and went away laughing.

But, quickly serious, turned to Berne. “What is it, my child? What do you want to ask me?”

“*Oncle* Jubat, if the rice should not be good—”

“Is it not good?”

“Very. But if there *should* be trouble! We planted late and our pump and tractor are worn out; we couldn't buy new parts; Mr. Jonas keeps rebuilding for me and I believe Onestide holds the whole business together by sheer force of anxiety. It's all right so far and we did drown out the grass. But now the bayou's low, an early drought; and if there should be salt!” He nodded; the whole country-side was beginning to fear a drought. “You know what Father did to help Landry. Would those creditors wait another year,—if anything should fail? You know what has been done, or *nearly* all that my father has done to raise money. I do not,—exactly. Would it be disloyal to Father if I ask you to look up records and tell

me, as far as you can, where we stand? Just what *can* happen? It isn't that my father doesn't want me to know, you see. He just doesn't like to think about the troubles himself. And Landry—"

"I know. Surely it is not disloyal, *petite*, to ask me. You are the manager of these estates. It is better for all that you should know. I will see what records are at hand and let you know, shortly. What Landry may have done is, of course, the *x* of the problem. But Camille Berenicia Marie, look up there! At the sky. How far can you see? How far beyond the clouds? Not at all; is it not?"

"Beyond the clouds? No; not at all."

"One is there, Who sees all here, however. Let us smooth our brows and hearts, yes, and leave a small part of the management to Clearer Eyes. Would that not be more,—how do they say in these days?—efficient? Yes, *petite*?"

"Yes, Uncle Julien,—*Oncle Jubat*," she used the childhood name tenderly and thanked him with a smile, as they rejoined the others within.

The Judge's charming wife and daughters and Berne's beloved Ellen Droussard having arrived, and, soon after them, lemonade and *orgeat* and patience-cakes, ivory toned, crisp and tempting, General Bardé, walking stiffly, leaning on his cane, drew Berne aside under the general talk. As she relieved him of his glass emptied of its cool milky *orgeat*, he said to her, "Thank you, my child, for keeping my grandson here, with us." He smiled.

"You know, I suppose, that it is for you that he stays?"

Berne looked at him, startled, but answered, "For you, too, sir. For us all, I think. Do you think it is well that we keep him here?"

"But very well! The longer the better, Berenicia; for him and also for me. It means new life to me, to have a young man's voice in my house—again. Oh, yes; it is good for us both. And how about you, *ma mie*? Is it pleasant for you, too, that he remains?"

"The longer Daniel stays the better for me. No matter what comes after," she told him candidly.

He bowed, lifted her hand in the old way, kissed it. "What comes! What but good can come, my little one?" Daniel's grandfather was naïf and saw but his own dream.

Berne pressed her lip and was glad to see Martin and Ellen come over to them, saving her from a reply.

Martin regarded her keenly; he could see that she was pale, her eyes a moment misty. Martin squared his jaw. He knew that Berne was a favorite with the General, tried not to let his imagination guess of whom they had been speaking.

The Judge's alert eye, too, had seen the General's face glow and Berne's grow pale and Martin square his jaw regarding them. As Berne turned to her friend, Ellen, he drew the General away from them, led him out upon the "gallery," now growing so

dusky that the flowers on the vines shone white as stars.

“Odillon,” he said gently. “Let us not anticipate. By doing so, we discount happiness when it comes; and, if it fail, we add disappointment to regret.”

“You are speaking of Berenicia and my boy? Why should I not anticipate? Am I never to expect *my* wishes to be fulfilled? This would be only justice. It is justice,—justice to me! When my son, Olivier, married, I gave them that good old plantation; it was like giving them my heart,—you know well, Jubat. But I gave it to them. And then, this little *papillon* of a wife, she doesn’t like it, doesn’t *like* that plantation. So! She leaves. She deserts. And Olivier goes, too, after her and *with* the boy! To follow her, go into business in the North with her family, my son sold the plantation, that ancient plantation. And left me alone. My son she took, my grandson and my ancient home! If Berenicia and the angels can make restoration of Daniel, if I can encourage that, shall I hold back my voice? Shall I consider *her*? *Mais, non!*”

Judge Julien Le Boeuf had been hearing this complaint for many a year. He only said, “But is it in your power to decide? To consider? Hope not too much. That is all.” The Judge, wise in reading countenances, gravely remembered Martin’s regarding Berne. “Besides,—may I say it, old

friend?—what could your Daniel *do* here? And for our girl, we want ease, too; is it not? Ease at last. Forgive!”

“I am not so childish as you think,” General Bardé said rather sharply. “I have given thought to that, too. I have my ideas. Well, we shall see, my old one!” He gave a defiant chuckle.

Ellen Droussard had seen the little by-play, too, and smiled at her thought: Dear old Berne! If she could be happy and rich, too, all the better; but, if it came to a choice, kind fate let Berne have whatever she wanted and be happy!

She put her arm about her friend’s waist protectingly. Berne felt her sympathy. “All goes well, Nelly. Don’t you be fretting about me,” she whispered. Then, “There’s Landry’s horn. We’ll have to hustle, Martin, to get back in time for dinner.”

In the car, she asked her brother, “Elodi’s headache better, Lan?”

“Unless she’s a good actress. Little rascal was sitting on the gallery entertaining everybody of draft age in the parish.” He laughed. She was playing queen to a group of youths, to be sure, when he came; but the coral flew into her creamy cheeks at the unexpected sight of Landry and her pansy-petal eyes widened with pleasure. “Certainly a sweet youngster!” Landry commented.

“Sweet—and sincere,” Berne said, and Landry at

the wheel gave her a sharp, searching glance back over his shoulder.

Berne and Martin met Mater and Peter, waiting for them, at the gate of Imaginaire in the light of an old lantern on the gatepost. It troubled Berne to feel that Mater was reading too much into this friendship.

"You are late. Singsie's getting anxious about the gombo," said Mater, smiling.

"Oh, Sis!" Peter cried. "Y'ought to see the dandy fishing-pole Jury gave me. He gave it to me 'cause I told Singsie he was better looking than Brazile over at Droussards'. Gee! *Anybody's* better looking than Brazile. But Singsie said Jury took this pole away from a boy in his congregation for fishing on Sunday. So I don't know if I ought to accept it. Think so, Sis? It's a peach of a pole."

"That does complicate the situation," Berne laughed. "We'll talk it over later, Pete."

"Well, I guess I'll go fish a little bit with it early in the morning, then,—in case I have to give it up. I'll go speak to Uncle Hope about bait," running off.

"Fine lad!" Martin said to Mater.

"Tell it to Berne, Martin. She's his real mother. Didn't you hear him ask her moral guidance just now? And he's been with me for an hour!"

"It's because he thinks you're too young," Martin began. "Now, Berne—" he turned toward her; but

Berne was waving apology and running along the *coulée* road to meet an old woman in a ramshackle buggy.

The old woman was lighting a lantern, the glow made her ugliness witchy. She was black-clad, pear-shaped, and wore a black sunbonnet stiffened by little sticks. Her face, too, was shaped like an over-ripe pear and her eyes were pitted specks in it.

"That's the girl you think unimpulsive," Mater said laughing. "Want to run after her? Mme. Veriot is interesting. An herb doctor, and, some say,"—she whispered in mock mysteriousness,—“a Hoodoo!” She liked to play with Martin, but had resigned him entirely to her daughter.

But Martin expostulated, “You’re not dismissing me, Madam?” and stayed with her.

“*Bonjour, Mme. Veriot!*” Berne called and spoke to her in the French *patois* that was the only language the old woman knew. “You are very far from home, *madame*. And it is so late!”

Borel’s mother turned her pits of eyes on Berne, revealing nothing, smiling over-sweetly. She knew that Berne had been hunting for Borel and she thought she knew why. Here was a chance to mislead her.

“Oh! Yes! My neighbor let me use this horse and buggy. I am come so far to gather the herbs for my poor boy. Of course I go far—and late—to find a cure for my poor boy.”

“Béqué is ill? Or Balthasar?”

"No, *chère*. It is my poor Borel."

Berne thought quickly. No one quite trusted this old lady; but few found any reason for actual distrust, either. Her simple-hearted neighbors feared her alleged occult powers and seldom complained even to Mr. Ned, their landlord, of her unsanitary and unneighborly housekeeping; and her thrilling tales of weird experiences intrigued them and gave her a certain position despite suspicions of her veracity. So, with Berne and Mr. Ned and the other planters, there was always something appealing about the old rascal, something pathetic, that pled for her the indulgence due a queer but harmless old nuisance.

Borel ill? But Dan had seen him yesterday.

"What is the matter with Borel?"

The old lady shrugged sadly. "Who knows? But I am to know—soon," cryptically. "Maybe it is a pain in the heart of my poor boy that his honest motives are not better understood, *chère*; eh?"

"How long has he been ill?"

Ah! The old woman had been on the look-out for this question. "When this trouble has come to him? Only this morning. He is now in bed. I go home with them now, the herbs to heal him."

"I hope they will. I'm coming over to Salt Mine in the morning, to your house. I want to see Borel, want to talk with him."

The old woman's huge bulk palpitated. She had

not expected this development. And Borel, her "invalid," was at that moment deep in the swamp, in the abandoned hut of an "alligator-man," covered with mosquito-netting, waiting orders from the Prowler. She did not expect him to be home next morning.

She raised dirty, pudgy hands. "Oh! No, no, no! No, *chère*. I implore that *mademoiselle* will not come. My poor boy is so sick and the herbs will not do their work unless he is entirely alone. The herbs and—" she looked mysterious—"and something else. Other remedies. Not tomorrow, *mademoiselle*! I am desolated. But *mademoiselle* will wait until after tomorrow?." She wiped her eyes. There was a real tear on her cheek.

"Why, of course, I won't visit you if you don't want me."

"If I don't *want* you! Oh, how I am misjudged!"

"No, no. I mean if it's not wise. Does Borel need anything?"

"The poor always need. And now that my poor boy has been so unfortunate as to displease Mr. Ned, I do not like to request him—"

Berne smiled, knowing how constantly and successfully the Veriots "requested" him. "Well," she said. "Go to the kitchen, if you wish, and ask them to give you what you need."

"The good saints bless you!" Then she had a happy thought. "You don't like that man who

comes with my Borel over this way sometime, *mademoiselle*? A mother must watch—”

“I don’t like him to get Borel drunk; do you?”

“Oh! He does *that*? The black devil! But maybe not altogether so black, after all. He has gone to the city today for a few days and will bring back some muslin to make my Belle her dress for the ball. He is going to buy it, a gift to my Belle. So! There is good in us all!” She shrugged charitably and went off to the kitchen.

She had done a good job. Now the small idiot would believe Borel ill and in seclusion and the Prowler out of town. “I have reassured her,” she chuckled.

Her words, indeed, should have reassured Berne; but her contact had the opposite effect. Or something had.

All that evening, Berne had been feeling a subtle unrest, a vague sense of threat. At the moment when she met Mme. Veriot, it deepened to definite unease.

All through dinner, she fought it. And afterwards, while she accompanied her father, playing the old piano very softly that its jangled keys might not mar the beauty of his violin,—a service that usually soothed and rested her,—her nerves were quivering.

Mater, in the glow of the lamp, was her most amiable and prettiest self. Peter was reading, curled up in the window-seat with a copy of *St. Nicholas*. Landry and her good friend, Martin,

were listening to the music, in the shadows. The room was sweet with the fragrance of the first Confederate jasmines opening outside the windows.

It was just the sort of evening that Berne loved, the kind to make her forget her cares.

But now they came about her on black wings in the dark.

"If I had neck-feathers, they'd be rising," she thought.

Oh! It was just because this *was* a restful moment. She had been at high tension; soon she would relax.

The black wings swung about her.

At least the birds were all right for the present; Borel ill, Prowler away, Burden, if he *had* been after them, gone.

How lovely that melody! There was a note in Commodore's violin just then like the diminishing languor of the whitebrowed warbler's song. She could almost see his vivid person, slate and black and orange and white, winging through the cypress brake. The cypress brake!

The black wings brushed her cheek.

She was glad it was music tonight instead of talk, glad that Mater and Martin and Landry were sleepy and went to bed almost as early as Peter did.

Her father always read until late. This was a good chance to warn him, to tell him what Dan had heard, ask him to entrust his secret to Odrasse and Daniel. Oh, no! She would wait until morning.

She *must* be too tired tonight, or why should she feel this restless anxiety, so unlike herself?

She kissed his delicate, blue-veined temple, clung to him a moment as she said, "Good night." He was so good and sweet, poor, dear Commodore!

She went to bed but could not sleep. What was the matter?

Could it be because of Da? No. This feeling was akin to fear. Perhaps the thought of Daniel, that more tangible ache, would be a counter-irritant.

So she lay thinking about him. She had not had much time to do so since that talk in the forest, to think about what he had said, what he meant, how hurt his eyes were under the laughter.

Wings! Yes! Daniel *was* as wings to her. She recognized that that was true. Since his health had improved and the listlessness of illness had gone, she had turned with ever-increasing eagerness to his gaiety, his whimsies, his charm. *Gai-Da!* Oh, in that much he was right. It *was* what she needed,—play.

And how they would miss this playmate! Commodore would miss him too. What an unusual, bright Commodore it was, that other evening, laughing heartily in the big chair, his *Æschylus* forgotten on the floor beside him, while Dan read aloud from "Once Aboard the Lugger!" She called up picture by picture. *Gai-Da* teaching wig-wag to Peter and Beetee and Shoestring—that funny class!—out in the meadow. *Gai-Da* making old Hope's eyes

twinkle with tales of how the army mules behaved before the negroes came over to France, and of their reformation after that. *Gai-Da* wheedling Singsie into making frozen cream-cheese for him. *Gai-Da* going to church in Curéville with such a radiant *Grandpère* leaning proudly on his arm! *Gai-Da* holding Mme. Boutin's yarn as she wound it and singing old *chansons* with her, her broken soprano and his not-too-musical baritone ending in laughter together. "*Eh, ron, ron, ron!*"

How Daniel seemed to enjoy it all, the play! Indeed, they would miss him. But wings were not enough without a nest!

She would not clip those wings, would not let him, in his tender mood, undertake responsibilities, promises that might later become chains upon his spirit. Wings were to fly away with.

Wings!

Again the black wings in the darkness. That insistent apprehension!

At last, she dropped into troubled slumber.

Once Mr. Ned, Berne's Great Gentleman, had confided to her a new understanding of birds, his discovery or his fancy. Having lived with them hour by hour and day by day, he had come to believe that they could communicate with one another by thought transference alone, or by means almost as tenuous. He felt it, could almost "get" it himself, sometimes, he said.

Perhaps he was right. And perhaps bird-protectors *could* share this power. Perhaps it was the sure, silent call of the depth of need to the love that would help; but something, at least, brought Berenicia to her feet in the red flush of dawn. Something as definite as a cry.

She knew that she must hurry, though she did not know why. Something was wrong; she must find out what it was.

She dressed in her khaki as quickly as she could; not even stopping to brush her hair, half-braided it loosely.

She took her little revolver and went toward the stables.

The crimson dawn was changing into the red-gold of early day, when she had saddled her horse and was about to mount him.

She heard the rumble of an automobile, dying in the distance,—probably on a “branch” of the main-road, where it crossed her road by the *coulée*.

She ran to the gate, climbed the gate-post in the vines, to see if she could catch a glimpse of it at the one clearing in the winding road where that might be possible. What car would pass on that inconvenient road, so early?

She could not see the car, but could tell when it passed that clearing, quickly—too quickly—disappearing in a cloud of rosy-tinted dust.

She ran back to the stables, mounted her horse,

dashed down the *coulée* road towards the cross-roads. Somehow she had to follow that car as far as she could.

At the junction of the roads, she knew why.

Something had fallen from that speeding automobile, something white, lying in the road. She dismounted, picked it up. Something that turned the world into flames of anger.

The bloody "scalp," crowned with its lovely, recurved plumes, sliced from the quivering, living back of a snowy heron!

Back on her horse, she fairly flew homewards, then to old Hope's cabin door and hammered on it. She shouted to old Hope to run to the house and "call up" Odrasse, at once, at once, and send him to the heronry.

Her horse went fast, but by the time she had reached the store by the ferry and pounded on Noalie's door, the fleet Vitesse had brought Odrasse beside her.

"Obar! Obar!" she cried. "Come to the Cypress Pool—with your gun. Plume hunters! Come, come! Is Dan Bardé here, Noalie?"

"He went with Caleb the fisherman. Last night. I don't know, *chère*, where—"

But Berne had gone, following Vitesse, who disappeared in the distance.

CHAPTER XVII

RED DAWN

ANOTHER warning had been received in the night.

Daniel, when he stayed over night at the ferry, slept in the improvised bedroom in a lean-to addition to Obar's house, a little room kept for chance guests belated. It had its own outside doorway, and to this had come Dan's friend, Caleb, the fisherman.

Caleb knocked sharply, whispered, "Quick! It's Caleb. Hurry up!"

"*Qui est là?*" came Obar's sleep voice from within. "Who is?"

"Caleb. Sorry I woke you. Me'n Bardé's goin' on a hunt."

Daniel followed Caleb's long form to the boat in the canal. Caleb, lank and slow, looking as Abraham Lincoln might have looked if ambition had never claimed him, held up the lantern for Dan, saying, "I don't know as I've really *found* anything, Bardé. And, tell you the truth, I don't much believe there's anything *to* find. I don't know what you and Guidry got in your heads. But you asked

me to watch and I'm watchin'." He laughed. "You said if I saw anything unusual while I'm night-owling, like I do,—well! Now I'll show you something I ain't never seen before in these waters, and that's saying a heap. A light in the *old* alligator hut. Wind's right," he said as they sat down. "And current's with us. Reckon I'll use the sail 'stead of the motor. We don't want any racket if we can help it, I suppose? Yessir. I seen a light in the cabin. Ain't anybody used that hut since Alligator-man moved to th' other side the woods in '97. First off, I thought it was niggers,—some Hoodoo doin's, maybe. But kind of didn't seem like that. And, then I thought 'twas liquor smugglers and I'd better mind my own business. Lots of deep water hereabouts, and boats on the Gulf—you know how it *could* be. It was too far in the swamp for that,—too many better places; but yet and still! Well, I was just gliding along, keeping my eyes open like you and 'Drasse said to do; and I seen where a *piroque* had gone in,—been dragged over the mud,—I seen it by my lantern light. Good thing that window's so high up in the cabin, or I'd a-been spotted, sure's you're born. Golly! We 'most hit bottom, then! Canal's getting powerful low. Bound to rain soon, though; bound to! Well, I got to shore and I picked up this-yer bottle. Had been full o' gin. Smell it. Yes; ain't it? But some folks is hard to kill. Well, I seen it was Borel Veriot's—"

"How?"

Caleb chuckled. "These-er funny marks on the bottle. That's the way his mother scratches up on the yerb bottles she puts up,—to make folks think it's 'gifted.' She never lets them bottles out of her keeping; just pours the stuff out for her 'patients.' And that gin smells like Borel, too." He laughed. "You told me to watch Borel particular. So then I come on and fetched you. If you want to go in and take a peek at whatever's doing, I'll take you."

All this in low tones, as the boat drifted quickly down the canal between the black shadows of the woods, where the wraiths of gray moss waved ghostly signals and the long fingers and fans of palmettos beat a witches' tattoo.

The lapping, whispering voices of the swamp, the sudden hisses and murmurs, the swiftly hushed cries in the blackness, the sense of silent watchers and silent gliders on the marge, made Dan feel like a sailor on Avernus.

He took an electric torch from his pocket; *Grandpère* had bought it to use in the automobile he intended to purchase—maybe—some day. "Too small to be much good in *there*, I'm afraid," Dan said.

"Don't flash it now," Caleb warned him. He had darkened his lantern. "Look!"

Far back in the blackness, like a pinhole in a sable curtain, shone an eye of light, and, beneath it, misty rays glinted between the logs of the old cabin.

"Brought my *piroque* up from yonder before I called you," said Caleb. "Grab her; will you? Right there. And drag her along. I got to find a safe covey for this *bateau* before we leave her. There's a little bay along here somewhere,—nobody could find *in* if they didn't know. Here she is! Now, then!"

In the *piroque*, while Caleb paddled through the black swamp, they had to release the glow of the lantern and Dan had to flash the torch on old roots and stumps and submerged moss-tangles. But they kept on the side of the cabin away from its door and believed themselves unseen. The sighing of the swamp waters covered the almost silent dip of Caleb's practised paddle.

But Borel, too, was a swampsman; and this was not the first time he had had cause to hide in the brake. His quick ear caught the faint, regular tap of the blade. Motioning his companions to silence, he had slipped out and around the cabin. He got a flash of the light and two men dimly outlined against it.

He came back excited, with triumphant vanity more than with apprehension.

"Uh—huu," he whispered. "You all think Borel one fool, *hein*, to insist we protect this way in the woods—from the canal water. I saw that Caleb; what for he want come up canal, when she's low, and better fishing in the bayou and golf;

hein? For watch! That's for what. For sneak. And this here Bardé—"

"Aw, shut up! Tell us what's doing. Who's coming?" from Prowler.

"Them two; must be. I couldn't see. But Borel had right—"

He had taken enough of his deadly gin to make him loquacious. Prowler covered his mouth with no gentle hand.

"Damn you; shut up! Now, let's see what to do. Three of us and only two of them, if you're right. Our folks must be nearly in from the road by now. We'll have to move quick, soon's it's daybreak, to meet 'em. Let's see. Thing to do is to get these whoever-they-are tied up here. It's too late to stop our crowd and we can't have nobody see us. Get 'em tied up here; knock 'em out in the dark, if we can. And leave somebody to guard that door and keep them. That's the ticket. Then we can go to Cypress Pool when day comes, meet our men and go to it! This'll be a good thing for us, if we use it right. 'Cause if these fellows are spying on us and if they don't show up or give warning, the folks'll think everything's O. K., in here. We can keep 'em locked up in there all day, like as not. The hut's strong and there's a good lock on the door. And Jim's big enough to handle the two of 'em; and we're here too. Then, you stay on guard afterwards, Jim. Veriot's too drunk."

"No. Me. I stay on guard," said Borel.

"Nothing doing! You'd like to keep out of the bird-shooting if you could."

"Yes. Why not? I *live* here—"

"So you can be free to squeal on us, if you want to? No, siree. Ssh!"

As Dan and Caleb approached, the window went black.

"They've put out the light," Dan whispered.

"No. Look. That reflection on the tree. They've taken the lantern around the house to the other side. Ready to make a get-away, likely. We must get behind 'em. Of course, you can use a gun?"

For a moment Dan's old trouble clutched at his nerves. He shook it away. "You bet I can!" he said.

"I got another," and Caleb gave him one.

"Wouldn't it be better to put out the lights?"

"Much. But we can't; need 'em. It's tricky here."

But soon they hit the natural embankment on which the hut stood; on the side they had aimed for, away from the door. Dan slipped his torch back into his pocket. They stepped out into the ooze, pulled up the boat and were about to put out the lantern, when from the thicket two men leaped upon them.

One crashed an accurate boot through Caleb's lantern.

The night was pitch dark.

Dan drew his gun, but hesitated to shoot. After all, he did not know who these men were; nor, positively, that they were outlaws. But he let his assailant feel the revolver and backed him against the cabin.

He cried out, hearing a scuffle close at hand, "Let my buddy go, or I'll shoot this fellow. All right, Caleb?"

Arms surrounded him from behind; the sharp crack of a stick threw his pistol to the ground.

Dan turned to help the older man. "All right, Caleb?"

But Caleb was strong. "Sure!" he panted. "I've got him down. Look to yourself. Damn—!" They had thrown a cotton-sack over Caleb's head, and two forms dimly seen, were dragging him into the cabin.

As Dan rushed after them on the narrow, slippery ground, in the dark, an arm and a boot assailed him of some one braced against the cabin.

Daniel fell backward into the swamp.

His feet sank into moss and mud; his head splashed through the water, and hard upon a sunken log from which the startled moccasins hurried.

Had that log not been covered with lichens and ancient mosses, Dan might have suffered severely from the blow. Had it not been there at all, his head would have sunk beneath the waters.

As it was, he came to himself quickly, though dazed.

He came to himself; but to another self,—that one he had been in France.

The flash of moving lanterns blazed, in his memory, into a far-distant Véry shell; the ooze he lay in was the detestable mud of the trenches; the pain in his head was no new pain; that gray-black figure bending above him was there for his life; a mortal enemy.

Dan thrilled again, as to the “great game,” alert, wary, alive.

He kicked his feet loose from the moss, braced them against the water-covered half of the cypress log upon which the man, Jim, was standing. He warily moved his left elbow to rest on the wood beneath his head; raised his head slowly.

Over that slowly rising head, Jim dropped the sack he was holding open, called out to his mates in the darkness, “I’ve got him. Beat it! Beat it!”

But Jim was mistaken. Just as Jim’s heavy voice had boomed out its message, just as the sack descended over him, Dan, who had “played” so well in the gymnasium where he had shone as an amateur boxer, who had “played” so well on the gridiron where his quick responses became famous, brought his trained muscles tense, and with a desperate sweep of energy launched his right fist to the point of the other man’s jaw, with the full force of his upspringing body behind it.

Big Jim crumpled silently, doubled up forward, fell face down upon Daniel. He was "out."

Dan rolled him over in the ooze; sat upon him; extricated his own head from the sack; slipped the sack upon Jim's.

Prowler and Borel had left Caleb bound in the hut, where they had dragged him, and had jumped into their *piroque* at Jim's call.

Hearing the splashing waters, Prowler was not satisfied.

"Is it all right, Jim?" he cried. "Need us? Have you got him?"

Jim was unconscious, but Dan pressed his hand hard upon his mouth through the sack to make his silence sure.

The Prowler repeated the call, anxiously; lifted his lantern.

Daniel stiffened himself for trouble, drew his head aside until his face was hidden behind a cypress, waved a reassuring hand into the pale beam of the distant light. Then Daniel, who had "played" so well as an amateur actor and imitator, deepened his voice and dared to reply in the heavy, negroid tones he had just heard, "Sure! Beat it! Beat it!"

"I'll send a boat back for you later on,—if it's O. K. Right now, we'll need everybody. If it don't come, you can make out, canal side, by day," Prowler cried.

The cold lapping water in his face, wetting it

through the sack, was slowly reviving Jim, who struggled feebly.

"Please Heaven they go on before I have to drown this chap," Dan thought.

He dragged Jim towards the hut; it was hard to do because Jim was heavy. But it was not far.

In the gloom, Prowler and Borel still lingered to make sure all was well.

Dan kept his head down, his face away from the flickering ray of their lantern.

As he slammed the door of the hut, he dared to call, simultaneously with the bang of it, "O. K. So long!"

He heard the diminishing pat of their paddles. Then he drew his flashlight from his pocket, looked for Caleb, who was bound and too still for Dan's reassurance.

"Caleb!" he cried, rousing him.

"All right!" the fisherman answered rather feebly, giving thanks for the sight of Daniel. Dan released him, bathed his head with handfuls of marsh water, tied his handkerchief about the ugly contusion there that had stunned him.

"Better look at that fellow!" said Caleb after a little.

Jim was clutching faintly at the wet sack that was suffocating him.

They took his gun away, released him from the sack, bound him with the ropes that had tied Caleb.

"Oh, yes! I'm all right. Just groggy a little,"

Caleb answered Dan's solicitude. Then he flashed Dan's torch over Jim, a stranger to him, a mulatto follower of Prowler's from the Florida swamps. He was "coming to," but still dazed and unhappy. Caleb looked from the mulatto's brawn and bigness to Daniel. Then he laughed.

"*I'm* all right," said he. "And, for a *sick* man, seems to me like you're all right yourself."

Dan's voice shook with a sudden realization. "I'm a well man, Caleb," he said.

The next instant was to prove it.

They had locked the door on Jim and stepped out into the mire; the first pale ruddy-gray of dawn flickered into the forest. If it was growing light in the woods where they were, Dan thought, it must be clearer still on the Crown of Cypress Pool, to which perhaps those others were bound.

He turned to Caleb eagerly.

"Well, we sure got ounr," Caleb said shamefacedly, leaning against the cabin wall. "I declare I'm a dandy guide!"

"No one could foresee— Listen!"

Borne by a sudden breeze, from far off in the woods, came the sharp crackle of shots. Overhead and all about them, cries and rushes of distress, of anger, of warning, broke out through the wild.

Shots! But all they meant to Daniel was a call to action. Distant shots; and he wanted to get near them!

"They're shooting egrets!" he cried. "Come! Come!"

But their *piroque* was gone!

Standing, futile at the cabin door, hearing occasional far-off shots and the outraged cries of nearby sympathetic birds, Dan felt a terrible bitterness and an overwhelming exultation.

He wanted to save Flame's birds for her. He had tried to save them. And now! His eyes were hot with angry tears. Now, by George, he *would* save them!

"Can't we walk? Isn't there a way?"

"Yes. We can walk. It's a long way 'round, though, and slow." Caleb was sorry for him. "But come on. Watch out for snakes. Kick out before you step out. So!"

They were, neither of them, entirely without dizziness and the way on foot toward the Cypress Pool was arduous and uncertain. But Caleb went ahead, using the torch in shadowy places, picking out safe logs and ridges; and Daniel followed with wrath in his heart.

Every time a gun cracked, he clenched his fists. Unless he could do something now, he was "footless," useless, he told himself; simply no good.

He could not even pause to celebrate that he had proved himself a well man that night, a man restored.

This was Flame's game, protecting birds was her

game; the game she loved. And it was his game now to save them. He was going to win it for her.

He crashed on through the morass, slipping, stumbling in the darkness and the shadowy light of dawn.

And in all the worry and trouble of it, something sang in his heart. He laughed. After all,—in a sense,—as always with him, *Gai-Da* was having a good time.

“Good thing they left you your gun, Caleb. And I’ve Jim’s ‘cannon.’ How long will it take them to get all the herons? Are we going to be too late?”

“No. Not *too* late. Some, of course! They must be counting on shooting all day; anyway all morning. Couldn’t very well line the birds up and shoot ’em at daybreak, all at once, you know.” He chuckled. “They keep on coming back to the nests,—cranes won’t desert their young-uns, no matter what.” To protect their nests! “So they can keep on potting at ’em, ’way in yonder.—Is to say, they *think* they can. H’m. Prob’ly quite a few of them fellers in yonder, Bardé. And just you and me,” Caleb suggested. “How was you figuring on making ’em stop?”

“Let’s decide about that,” cried *Gai-Da* and began to think out a strategy.

When Daniel and Caleb neared the hunters in the crimson dawn their plan was made.

“What they’ll want to do is to get away safely,”

said Dan. "And that, I guess, we can't stop,—just we two. But we can stop the slaughter; and that's the main thing."

"If they think there's only two of us, no telling what they'll do us," said Caleb, "to keep us from giving them away. It's a penitentiary offense, killing herons. And we're pretty far from anywhere."

"Exactly. So they must be made to think that we're a crowd." He outlined his plan. Then, "They believe you and I are tied up in the cabin; so that ought to help. And, whatever happens, we have friend Jim!" he said.

Sharp shots came; they were closer to them. Dan's nerves gave one sensitive quiver. "Be still!" he ordered them mentally.

He and Caleb separated in the swamp, each to his own agreed side of the pool. Then, as the hunters were quiet, they fired their guns quickly into the air,—Dan's gun, Caleb's, Dan's. And Dan's voice rang out, "Here! We've got 'em! Six of you cut them off to the right, Warden; the six others close in here with us!" He fired again.

They could hear the others crashing through the swamps, in their *piroque* and afoot; fleeing wildly.

Daniel and Caleb shook the underbrush, fired again, shouted, "Hurry, men! In here! They're making a get-away."

Soon they heard the auto starting, tearing down

the road,—the auto that went so fast that Berne saw the last of it even as the dawn was fading.

The red and gold and saffron lanterns of the dawn hung on every tree around the Cypress Pool, sparkling on the jade and chrysoprase and emerald of foliage and breaking it into bloom of ruby and amber, of amethyst and topaz.

The waters of the Pool, a turquoise plate, like the round of morning sky above it, held all this jeweled radiance.

But many of the white flowers of wings that had decked the trees had fallen.

The Crown of Cypress Pool was red with more than dawn.

There lay many beautiful egrets, on the ground and in the waters, torn and quivering bodies, their backs raw from the scalpers' knives, their crests still bleeding!

The happy nuptial plumes had been torn away from living bodies to grace some ladies' hair, to make some hats more costly.

There lay parent birds, some stark dead, some dying with sad sounds, some palpitating silently to death. And, above them, in many homes of twigs in the thickets,—in homes they had stayed to protect and had died in vain to protect,—their baby birds were waiting to die of hunger.

Some nests were down, torn by ruthless hands; the infant inhabitants of these were the more fortu-

nate fledglings; they would die less slowly. Some were drowned; some injured, were being eaten-alive by the insects that already crowded into the wounds of the parents.

The Crown of Cypress Pool was a sanctuary no longer.

These birds were gone; but they were but few compared with the many hundreds saved! The hundreds of homes that Daniel had saved for Berne.

"But we've saved most of them! We've saved most of them!" Daniel exulted. "There are some casualties, of course," he smiled sadly, looking about him. "But those fellows will never come back now! The rest of the nests are safe! Caleb, —I'm sort of tired. Let's go in there—Guidry's platform—and rest."

The world began to swim a little.

Caleb picked up a young bird, put it in his pocket, followed Daniel.

They lay curled on the little floor of Odrasse's platform, smoking and resting as the red dawn continued to change into the golden morning, through which Berne would canter to the woods.

It was far from the ferry to the woods. Berne felt that her horse,—though, in fact he had never gone faster than now,—was moving like a snail. What was happening, what *had* happened? Oh, hurry!

Her loosely made braid had opened; the flaming

hair streamed free behind her as she urged the horse to follow Vitesse.

What were they about to find? She had a frightful vision of torn, dead and dying birds, of young doomed to starve,—by hundreds! But it was so early! The hunters could not have finished so early. Yet, that flying automobile! Had somebody frightened them away or,—she feared this was the truth,—had the hunters been there the day before, after she—and Dan—had left? When she was with Martin? When Daniel, who had been left on guard, was—where?

As she dismounted at the swamp marge, she saw where that car had stood under the heavy trees; where it had started.

She tied her horse beside Vitesse, entered the woods, picking her way after Odrasse.

It was silent in there.

In the reaction, Daniel had suddenly grown very weary and Caleb's head was none too comfortable, now that he had time to think about it. They were glad to rest on the platform and smoke.

Daniel looked up into the feathery, green-lace cypress branches against the sky, where some heron scouts were reconnoitering.

"Saved 'em for you, buddies!" he called out to them.

Caleb laughed. "You're a kid," he said.

Dan grew serious. "Think so, Caleb? I mean do you think it's—incurable?"

"Hope so," Caleb replied. "That don't go to say you ain't a *man*, too, I don't mean."

"Thanks. Hello! What's that? Is somebody coming? These noises in here always fool me."

"Wait. Yes, sir. Somebody is coming. Funny, too. Can't be *them*. Maybe somebody heard the shooting—"

They rose, came forward to the clearing beside the Cypress Pool, now a bowl of morning sunshine.

"It's Guidry," Caleb cried as Odrasse burst through the thicket at the other side of the pool.

Odrasse's face was grim as he looked at the ground, but it cleared with an immense relief as he raised his eyes upward.

"Didn't get many," he said; turned back and called, repeating reassuringly, "Didn't get many, Berne. Got *some*. But didn't get *many*. Most of them saved. Did you stop them, you and Caleb?" he asked Daniel. "Gosh! I'm glad!"

Then Flame came.

Her face was white and distorted. The flowing oriflamme of her hair in the sunlight was not more burning than her eyes as she looked at the dead and dying birds. Dan saw the woman who had been the child that struck him.

"Flame!" he cried, and, not caring who heard him, "Flame, my dear, my dear!"

Odrasse started.

"There aren't many dead," he said, and with

generous pleasure, "Bardé drove the men away; Bardé and Caleb."

Berne looked at them gratefully but had not time yet to rejoice, as she soon would do, that Daniel had been her birds' champion. Now her eyes and heart was flaming with anger because of those birds that had suffered.

"Who were they? Where did they go? Did you see them?" she asked. Her voice was unlike itself, keen, quick, rather terrible.

They outlined to her what had happened.

"Caleb," she commanded. "Go to the Sheriff. Take my horse. Tell them to arrest Borel Veriot. I'll stand for it. I'll testify against him. And that man who's been around with him. You know. And tell him about the one you've caught in the hut. Odrasse, ride Vitesse as hard as she'll go to Mr. Ned. Tell him. Ask State agents to come, or whatever he thinks best. Tell him to have Borel Veriot arrested if he goes back home. My responsibility. Have his mother questioned, watched. She lied to me. Oh!" As they hastened to obey, suddenly her voice weakened; she broke and cried like a little girl. "O Commodore! I betrayed them for you. If you'd only let me tell Mr. Ned! They're going to *starve*! O Da! I let those devils in. They're going to starve,—the little birds!" She pulled herself together. "But thank God you saved the others, you and Caleb! I'm so glad, Da! Caleb, I'm so glad!"

Obar was calling, arriving in his slow buggy.

Daniel put his arms about Berne. His heart was aching and rejoicing for her, and for himself it was saying, in stronger beats than he had ever heard, "She can care like this for the nests of birds. And how much will you do, son, for your own nest?"

He led her silently to Obar.

As the three rode home, crowded close in the buggy, Obar said haltingly, when Berne cried again about the starving fledglings, "We will implore the good St. *François*, Berne, that he will keep them from suffer'. Then they will die so soft like flowers. Eh, *chère*? Noalie will pray the good St. *François*. He love' the birds; is it not? And they are very efficacious, the prayers of Noalie."

Berne recovered her poise; sat white and straight and still, braiding her flowing hair, oblivious now, even of Daniel's presence. She was thinking of poor Commodore; the shock this would be to him.

They all sat in thought, good Obar's cluckings to his old horse and the little urging fillips of the reins the only sounds until they reached Ile Imagnaire.

Then she said, "You will come in with me, Da? Please." He was glad she wanted him.

The family and Martin had just finished breakfast when they arrived. They saw that something was wrong; rose, exclaiming, questioning.

Berne's self-control broke again; she burst upon them like a flame indeed and cried, "They've been slaughtering the birds. Plume hunters. The Prowler, Commodore! Probably Burden's agents, Landry!"

Steadying herself, not heeding the exclamations and questions, she went on in her clear voice, "I've sent word to Mr. Ned, Commodore. Had to, *now*. I had to, dear." She was so sorry for him! "And I've sent to the authorities. I've told them to arrest Borel Veriot and—the Prowler, Commodore. I had to."

He bowed his head. Yes; she had to. Even then he did not doubt the reality of the hidden treasure. If they took the Prowler, it might mean losing it. The map! Prowler had the map. Mr. La Grande could not afford to start again, and he did not know how near the Pool to dig. Perhaps that was not the place at all; Prowler was slippery; perhaps it was only for herons he wanted that strip and the treasure was elsewhere. Only Prowler knew. But, of course, Flame had to. Commodore was courageous, though his lips turned blue.

"Yes, dear; you—had—to," he assented.

"Martin, will you do something for me?" Berne asked.

"Anything, Berne." And at the way Martin said it, Dan started as Odrasse had done at Dan's own tone in the forest.

"Go to New Orleans *now*. You can just make

the train if you go now, without waiting for anything. A man named Judson Burden—”

“Camille!” Landry cried.

“Find him and find out about him. From the North,—try the hotels. Keep him watched. If he has anything to do with feathers, plumage, have him arrested, if you can; anyway watched. Even if he goes away—”

“Camille; no! You must not, Martin!” Landry said. “Wait! Listen. I know about him. It’s already *done*, Berne. It’s all over. What’s the good—”

“Martin, *please!* You’ve just time to get the train if you go *now*.” She was near the breaking point.

“I’m off,” said Martin and ran for his hat.

“Will you drive him, Da? Take that auto in the barn. Hope will show you. Hurry! Hurry!”

Dan and Martin ran to the car.

Landry had not dared explain his predicament before them. But now that they had gone, he turned furiously to his sister.

“You’re ruining me!” he cried. “Do you hear? Ruining me! That’s what you’ve done. You’ve ruined me,—all of us, maybe. Mater!” He turned to his mother like a small boy in trouble. “That man,—the man Camille is sending Martin after,—can ruin me. Like that! Will, too. If Camille goes on—”

"It's the law, Lan," his father said unsteadily. "If he's broken the law, we *must*—"

"He can *disgrace* me, I tell you! Oh! Of course, I haven't *done* anything; don't look like that! But he can make it appear—different. It isn't only the money. If that were all! That's why I didn't dare mention that he was—" he stopped, confused.

"Landry!" Berne cried sharply. "Did *you* know he was after plumes?"

"That's the thanks I get! When I nearly ruined myself trying to save those birds for you. No; I didn't know he was still after them. He swore he wouldn't kill them; promised me; so there wasn't any need to tell you. If you hadn't been so hasty; exposed him to Martin! Too late to do any good. And we don't *know* anything against him—"

"*You* do, Landry," his father said with sad decision.

But the Mater spoke quickly. "Quiet, Lan!" putting her arm about him. "Berne didn't know it was that serious to you. How could she? We're all excited now and can't think clearly. Of course, nothing's going to happen to you, honey. It's not too late to keep Martin from acting. We can wire him or telephone when he gets to the city. No harm done! Don't worry, dear. Wait till you're calmer; and tell us all about it."

Mr. La Grande tried to protest feebly, "I will not shield a wrong-doer," and sank back in his chair.

"Poor Commodore!" Berne said softly.

But Peter went to his sister, took her hand. "Darn shame, Sis! 'Bout the birds," he said, and as she leaned toward him he whispered, "Please don't feel so bad. When I grow up I'll make a big preserve on this place, like Mr. Ned's,—for all the herons—and *everything*, Sis!"

When he grew up,—on this place! Could she save the place for Peter?

Singsie came to the door. "Didn't none of you-all hear the telephome; so I answered it. It's fo' Miss Berne."

It was Judge Julien Le Boeuf who telephoned and he said to her, "I have looked up what you asked me, *chère*. My dear child, I must report—*hélas!*—that it seems very necessary indeed that the rice crop should be good. You understand? Courage! My dear girl! The 'harvest is in Good Hands."

"Thank—you,—*Oncle*—Jubat."

While Berne sat beside the telephone table listlessly, almost too weary to feel, Dan accompanying Martin to the train, told him what had happened in the woods.

Martin said, "Wish I'd been in on that."

"Oh! *You* are a real help!" said Daniel.

Martin smiled; he liked his transparent young rival. "Flame is always saying so."

"*Flame?*" thought Martin. *Flame* to Dan Bardé. To him she was always *Candidissima-candidissima*,—the whitest, brightest, frankest,—the name of her own favorite herons.

Yes; she could depend on Pinckney, Daniel thought again, as, having left Martin on the train, he walked up the oak-shaded walk to *Grandpère's*. Pinckney had something to offer. Well, by George, he'd go on "playing the game." He smiled ruefully.

At the door, he turned, hearing the unmistakable hoof beats of Vitesse. He hailed Odrasse.

As Daniel came towards him, Odrasse said, "She all right? I told Mr. Ned."

"Is he to be at home all day to-day?"

"Mr. Ned? He *was*. Can't tell where he'll be now,—after this. Why?"

"I'm going there. Want to see him."

"You better rest, Dan," solicitously. "Look tired."

"*Am* tired. But I must see Mr. Ned."

"Why, I told him everything."

"I want to see him about something else, 'Drasse." Dan looked up, with his usual light smile masking an unusual eagerness. "Want to ask him for a job—in the Salt Mine. Think he'll give me one?"

Odrasse looked at him anxiously.

"No. I'm not feverish." Dan laughed.

"Then you're joking."

"No, sir. Out for a job. Any old job in the Salt Mine. Mines are all I know, 'Drasse, and I want—to work. Here."

Odrasse was silent; then, generous. "Dan," he said. "That—that's—right. I'm glad, Dan. Honest to God, I'm *glad!*"

It astonished himself; but he liked Dan Bardé as well—almost—as he liked Berne.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

JUD BURDEN'S partner and his bird slaughterers made an easy escape in the automobile Berne had heard so early in the day.

It was believed that Borel Veriot and the man called Prowler had gone with them.

Mme. Veriot, smiling tearfully, insisted that her son had gone to employment in the city. That man who was so interested in her good boy had offered it, and her poor son, ill as he was,—he was so industrious!—got up from his bed, yes, and went off with him. The address? *Hélas?* She could not say. But, without doubt, her excellent Borel would soon write to his mother,—and, then, if they were still interested, she would inform them.

She closed the screen door of her cottage, a screen so torn that she might as well have left it open, and retired into the wide hall where a half-witted boy sat, grinning, on the dirty floor. Her broad back turned to the interrogators, *madame* grinned, too.

The mulatto called Jim, if he could, would tell nothing; sat sullenly in jail.

Even Mr. Ned and the wardens, unable to find Borel or the Prowler, supposed they had escaped.

Mr. La Grande was now forced to believe the treasure-hunt a ruse, a "blind." His nervous weariness and the sense of failure, the thought of the money he had given these deceivers, made him a pathetic figure, the more so for the high-bred courage and gentleness with which he bore his trouble. It must be a ruse, he thought,—and yet, that letter, the map! He could not quite disbelieve, even yet. But he *must* disbelieve. Perhaps,—later! At any rate, he was glad he had confided in no one but Flame.

But the treasure-hunt was not a ruse, nor had the two men abandoned it. They were still within a day's reach of Pool o' the Moon.

Borel, who had often poached oysters, hunted out of season and committed other acts that made hiding-places convenient, knew all the reedy inlets, islands and back-waters of the coast, the intake into every swamp, and every deserted club-house, bath-house and hunters' cover.

Having made careful preparations to escape and "lie low" after the plume-hunt, whether it were successful or not, the two had gone that day by *piroque* to the edge of the swamp and then had hastened by cross-cuts and behind hedges to the lower reaches of the bayou where, in the high reeds, another canoe was hidden. This brought them to one of the many small streams that lay like strands of a

spider-web about Vermilion Bay. There, was concealed an old motor-skiff, bought down the coast by Prowler, with Mr. La Grande's money. They had not dared take it into the bayou, where every boat and all the owners were well known to the dwellers along shore.

No one had thought, at first, to look for them in the lower reed marshes; it was supposed that the automobile had taken Prowler away and that Borel, if he had been left behind, would have hidden nearer his home.

The bay was empty of men when they reached it; only a huge sleepy pelican on a post and a "water turkey" roused by their engine, eyed them suspiciously.

The Prowler and Borel soon glided through the Southwest Pass into Gulf waters and then into a marsh lagoon, unfrequented, a labyrinth in tall reeds. There, an old hut on stilts was hidden by a mass of towering canes and the scrub oaks on shell islands.

Here they would wait until the search had cooled. Then slip back to the Pool o' the Moon, by night, and one last "try" for treasure.

Fish was plentiful and Borel had stocked the cabin.

"Once they quit looking for us, we'll be safer'n ever," Prowler said. "With the bird-hunting all done for, that red-head and her beaux won't be hanging around there in the woods. And nobody

else does. And the old man'll think we've got away and that I lied to him about everything. Besides, he's broke. I'm sure of the spot now; since I dug up that hinge. I was gettin' discouraged myself till then. But a hinge—like *that*—with *that* on it! But we'll have to move quick when we move."

"And you wasn't going have me to know about that money and stuff!" Borel began his old complaint.

"How d'ye know I wasn't? Chuck that line; will you? Just wasn't ready yet to tell you."

"You only told me 'cause I heard what *Monsieur* La Grande say to his '*moiselle*, Miss Berne. When you *had* to tell him to me. *Oui!*" Borel muttered.

He was maintaining this injured pose in the hope of getting the Prowler to confide in him exactly where the treasure lay. Then Borel would leave him in the cabin as he slept. He and his bosom friend, Oreste, they would do this digging. Oreste was waiting for a call from Borel. And off there by Panther Island, would soon come his brother Béqué in a boat. If there was treasure in the Big Woods,—a thousand devils!—should a stranger secure it? And one who had tried to deceive Borel? He was not the fool this man supposed; not at all! But first he should know exactly,—did it lie in the mound beside the Pool o' the Moon, or at the foot of the mound, and at which side? They would have no time to lose, he and Oreste. He'd get that

map, if he could. But this was a shrewd one; he must be wary.

Jud Burden had given Borel money to get away afterwards, and Borel had had the sense to entrust it to Oreste, who had the blood of a snail and no bad habits.

A grand gentleman, Mr. Burden! He did not ask anything for himself. Only he, too, wanted to punish this man here for concealing the affair from him, and maybe,—Borel could use his eyes!—maybe to punish also the La Grandes.

He had heard him, "Look down on Jud Burden; will they? Well, not if the court knows itself. When there's any condescending to do, I'll do it myself. Poor as Job's turkey and holding up her head like the Queen of Sheba! Stump *me*; will she? Nothing doing, miss; nothing doing!" And again, "If there's nothing in this, it will cost them a lot for nothing—and that's a joke. And if there is anything in it, it'll tickle me to do them *both* out of it." Borel understood him; what Burden liked was power.

Burden, too, had gone, leaving no address. Martin, who kept on his trail with cautious inquiries, in spite of Mater's telegram calling him off, found that Burden was in the feather trade, but was not expected at his home office in Chicago. He was going, they said there, to Venezuela, a great heron country.

In any case, it would be hard to prove his connection with the raid on the Crown of Cypress, with the actual slayers out of reach and his alibi assured. Only Landry could testify against him; and Landry would not. He still had hopes of Burden's "coming through."

Berne and her father felt that they must leave Landry's affair to Landry's conscience. Knowing Burden to be far away, and unconscious of the proximity of Prowler and Borel, the anxious family were discussing the problem as they rested in the cool living-room at noonday.

"It isn't as if I could prove his complicity," Landry said. "Even if I did tell that he wanted to buy the heronry! He *didn't* buy it. That doesn't say nobody else was on the same job. Oh, morally sure; yes! But if we can't *prove* anything, what earthly use— Look here, Camille; I'm worried sick. Can't you see I'm worried sick? What's the use of putting every chance away when maybe he didn't do it, anyway, or, even if he did, we'd have trouble proving it? And now that it's *over*! If I'd told in time to prevent, that would have been different. But I didn't think— And he gave me his word he'd come through now on those purchases. So!" All Landry's self-complacency was shattered; he looked like a frightened boy in a scrape. "Don't you care as much about me as for a lot of dead birds, Camille?"

Berne's eyes filled. This harassed brother moved

her love more than did his smug accustomed self.

"More than all the birds in the world, dear!" She sat on the window-seat beside him, put her hand on his shoulder.

"Well, then, see where you'd put me in! They'll think I should have told. Mr. Ned'll say— And Mr. Jonas— Anyway, I *won't* testify to what Burden told me. I don't care what you think. I believe there's a chance. And I won't throw it away. There's nothing to be gained by it." Landry gave Berne a shamed but determined stare.

"It's up to you, Lanny. Now, let's see what we can do,—if Burden doesn't send that money."

"He will. He said he would. He gave me his word."

"He gave you his word he wouldn't hunt plumes, too."

"Why, Berne! Don't be cruel!" Mater interjected. "Let him hope, at least."

"Indeed, yes. And *I* hope, too, Mater. But if Burden shouldn't? Where do we stand?"

"Why not cross that bridge when we come to it?" her father asked.

"Want to be sure there'll be a bridge there, Commodore. Just what does it mean, Lan? Besides this man's having your note?"

"Just a devil of a mess. Nobody's fault. I'd done business with him,—came just when I needed it. And Raoul and Janney and Tom Corbin told

me at lunch one day they'd each bought a lot of Mundane Company Stock. It's an unlisted local stock, slow but good. And they wanted to get rid of it and would give me a big commission if I could sell it quickly. And Burden was looking for something like that and promised on his word he'd take it in a month, when he'd unloaded something else. Gave me his word. So I didn't ask him to sign. I know I ought—but anybody, under the circumstances— Then I told the fellows it was a sure deal and that I was sort of strapped. And they let me have the commissions in advance. Just beastly luck. Anybody'd have done it. Seemed perfectly sure. He knew I was getting the money; told me to go ahead. Now,—it means I'd have to go to all those fellows and tell them I took their commissions and used them—without being sure of the sale; and couldn't give the money back." He choked, had to pause a moment. "Swell chance I'll have of succeeding in New Orleans after that! Or of it's being kept quiet. You know Tom Corbin! Talks so much. He's mean and never liked me. Oh, I don't think anybody'd actually—take steps!"

"Landry!" from his mother.

"I say I *don't* think they would, Mater. All supposed to be friends of mine,—even Tom. But it *could* make me lose my seat. And I'd have to give them all notes and I have already more notes

than I can meet. It puts me out of business; that's all."

Berne patted his hand, sitting with brows bent.

"I'll just have to leave town, Camille. Go somewhere else and start over."

"Why not start here, Landry? At Imaginaire?"

He gave a short laugh. "Not much! Couldn't make it go anyway. *You* couldn't!"

"*Quelle idée!*" her mother said. "This place is at the base of all our troubles."

"Kind o' good thing there's something solid at the base," said Berne.

"You don't seem to have made a great resource of it," Mater rejoined.

Berne winced. "These crops are the only real things we've got, at any rate," she said. "But you're right." She paused, pressed her lip. "I've been a failure here. Didn't know enough, I reckon." Again she stopped for control. "If it hadn't been for Mr. Jonas I know I'd have failed—worse." Not a word of her father's part in the "failure" or the heavy odds against her; but he felt it, hung his head. "But in a few years Peter'll make it pay us. He's going to *know*—not feel his way. He's going to agricultural college—as Landry wouldn't,—and be a *real* planter, worthy of—of respect,—like Mr. Jonas,—like Mr. Ned."

"Peter! An infant! And under your influence!

He'll want to be a dozen things before he chooses one. Once Lan wanted to be a street-car conductor," the Mater laughed.

"What good, my dears? Why harass yourselves? Trouble enough. And the crops *are* our last chance, daughter."

"Last chance is right," Landry said. "We'll be lucky if we have any plantation when this is all over."

Berne blanched. "That is true."

"Cheerful pair, you two!" Mater laughed. "Ring for the hearse!"

"Mater, you're wonderful!" Berne's eyes shone admiringly, at her mother's gaiety under these cares.

"As if my little daughter didn't know why!" archly.

"I don't, Mater."

"Suppose I can't see what's occurring between you and Martin?"

"Oh!—You're mistaken, Mater! We're just friends. If *that's* why you're serene,—I'm so sorry!"

"*Friends?* Tell that to somebody who hasn't known Martin all his life. *Friends?* The man's completely in love with you."

"Oh, *no*, dear!" clasping her hands.

"Oh, *yes*, dear," laughing.

"Even I can see that," her father smiled.

"Anybody can see it," Mater said. "And pretty

near everybody *has*. So! Does that thrill you?" gently teasing.

"I must find out," Berne said. "I must ask him."

"You must *what?*" Mater was aghast.

Berne scarcely heard her. What a horrible thing if this were so! Good Martin! But she was not going to let this friendship go without being sure. Oh! of course, they were all wrong! Poor Mater!"

"Berne doesn't care anything for Pinckney," Landry volunteered from his depth of gloom. "She's head over heels in love with Dan Bardé."

Mater sprang to her feet. "*Are* you?" she cried. "Are you fool enough to prefer—"

"Need we discuss my preferences, Mater? Sort of antique, having a family council on that!" She tried to smile.

But Mater was frightened. She had believed her pet project was succeeding, would save all. Now the family cares and fears crowded in upon her, this barrier down. As she sank back in her chair, white and tragic before the disappointment, Berne was moved by an overwhelming pity.

"Mater dear," she said. "Martin and I tried not to mislead you. We can't help it that we are not in love with each other."

"He is in love."

"Well,—supposing! I can't help it, then, that I'm not."

"Any girl could love Martin Pinckney. Many girls do! He is—"

"Everything splendid. No, Mater. Not for me. Mater, *dear!*" She went over to her mother's chair, knelt beside it.

"What are we to do? What are we to do?" Mater cried, wringing her hands. "You little idiot! How can Dan Bardé marry you? He—"

"He can't, of course."

"Just because he was wounded,—childhood sweethearts! I never dreamed *you* were a romantic! For an idler, a boy! And Martin Pinckney!"

"Please, Mater dear! I'm not marrying *anybody.*"

Mr. La Grande, who was a romantic himself, roused himself to his daughter's defense.

"There, there, *ma mie!*" he said to his wife. "We surely would not want Flame to marry for possessions!"

"Certainly not! But she would have cared for Martin, if this silly idea of Dan— She could send him off now,—as there's nothing in it; she's just said so herself. If she cared for us, she'd *try*, if only for Peter she poses so about!"

"This is horrible," her father persisted, firm for once; it anguished his sensibilities. "Please stop, my dear! You are excited now, disappointed. Stop and think. You want our girl to marry whom she loves,—or not at all. Surely."

His opposition and the inner knowledge that

he was right brought the Mater to hysteria.

"Love! I married for love!" she sobbed. "And see what I got for it—" his agonized face gave her pause.

"Mater is just upset, Commodore" Berne said. "People say a heap when they feel like that. Come on outside, Landry."

"'*Landry*'? You ought to call Landry! You won't even try to care for the best man you know! But Lan has to give up Helen Jeffrey—"

"Coming, Landry?" Berne suggested, her anxious eyes on her father's quivering face.

Landry followed her. As they turned at the door, they saw Mater throw herself in her husband's arms.

"I didn't mean that! You know I didn't. It was just because Berne—How *could* you think I meant it?" she sobbed, and he was soothing her with caresses.

But Landry had no comfort for his sister.

"Why don't Dan go home and go to work?" he asked her.

"He has gone to work. At the Salt Mine."

"A joke, that. How long will it last?" He laughed.

"Never mind. Mater mean anything, Lanny, about Helen Jeffrey?"

"How can I ask her to marry me, now? Probably never."

"Want to?"

"Never knew how much till I couldn't."

"Think Elodi—understands?"

"Got no reason to misunderstand. Of course, I do like that child,—a lot."

"Better be sure she understands, Lan."

"Why?"

Berne shrugged. She did not intend to flatter his vanity. Then, smiling a little, "Here comes one good reason, now."

Odrasse appeared down the road on Vitesse, cantering toward them.

"Landry," Berne said. "Here's a queer thing. Mater would be glad of my marrying Martin, if he asked me, he being rich, I poor, even if I didn't—care very deeply. But she understands that you can't ask Helen, who has heaps of money, to marry you,—though you're fond of her. Why?"

"Because I'm a man, of course," Landry said.

Berne's lips twitched upward.

She went to meet Odrasse, who cried out eagerly, "Berne, can you give me a minute, *now*? Dan Bardé found something—found out something. About Borel. About the woods. About Pool o' the Moon."

She led him into Elodi's arbor.

When, in a little while, they left it, her face was shining with a half-hope through its weariness. Suppose after all, this incredible dream, should be true!

She found her father alone in the window-seat with a cup of coffee.

"Commodore," she said to him. "Will you drive to Noalie's with me this afternoon? No; you're not too tired," smiling. "Because it's news,—of Pool o' the Moon. You are not to hope too much, please, honey!" as she saw in his face the sanguine rush to which he was too susceptible. "But, nevertheless, there *is* news of Pool o' the Moon. The boys have found what *may* be a sort of clue. They can't tell us here just now, very well, of course." He recognized that, with Mater home, and Landry. "They'll tell us all about it at Noalie's. Don't get too excited. And, please, rest now, until I call you."

"You rest, too, Flame dear. You're sort of white and wan, to-day. I never saw the suns so clearly,—or the constellation," Commodore's teasing names for her dark-amber eyes and the little line of golden freckles across the bridge of her nose.

"Yes; I think I'd better," she agreed. "I *am* tired to-day. Guess I'll climb up the steps to Peter's new tree-house, with some accounts, and go over them."

"Is that resting?"

"Oh! It's restful up there, among the nests. And, anyway, Uncle Hope says, 'Boat makes better time than the mule in the end, 'cause boat keeps

on going in its sleep.' " She laughed and left him.

But she found that he was right; she was too tired to work just then. She was glad to let the papers lie idle in her lap, as she sat in the big oak's branches on the platform built as a play-house for Peter; glad to sit there in the breeze, among the leaves and mosses, her back against the oak, and rest—and think.

She wondered why Daniel did not come to play. She missed him. Was it just because of his work at the mine, where Mr. Ned had set him to making a survey? No; for there were the beautiful evenings and Dan's working hours were not long. Could it be because he was guarding himself and her,—she smiled,—from growing to care more than was safe for them since he was going away soon? Or was it just injured pride because of what she had said to him? Not like Dan to sulk; but she was sorry to have angered him, to have injured his pride. She knew she spoke bluntly sometimes, too bluntly, perhaps,—that red-headed temper acting after all, maybe, in spite of her restraint. Had she misjudged him, over-stressed his indolence, perhaps?

She was proud, proud, proud, of what he had done in the heronry, saving her birds, of his resourcefulness and courage, of which Caleb had told Odrasse and Odrasse, the La Grandes. Her heart sang when she thought of that; but there was a

sting in it, too. For when she had called Dan on the telephone to say how grateful and proud she was, his laughing voice had protested, "Don't make a heap of it, honey. Thanks be they didn't get all your pretty birds. But for me it was just—a lot of fun." Was that merely true,—or was he remembering what she had said to him?

Berne had no subtlety. She just knew she was glad Dan had saved the birds, sorry she had hurt him, half-grieved and half-happy to believe that—perhaps—she had misjudged him, still fearing lest what she had said to him of himself were so. But, whether or not, it was right not to have bound him to her perplexities; of that she felt sure.

The mine was closed that afternoon, during repairs in the electrical wiring, and Daniel, awaiting Odrasse's return from *Ile Imaginaire*, was sitting on the steps of the General's "gallery," at the end of the stately avenue of oaks, chatting with *Grandpère* in the armchair above him. His horse was tied at the gate, ready for the ride with Odrasse.

"Can't last forever, though, sir,—that job in the mine," said Daniel gently. "Then, I'm afraid there won't be any excuse for my—staying here any more. Be mighty sorry to go, sir." He did not dare look at his grandfather, knowing how he was hurting him.

"Of course, you must live your life," said that old soldier without flinching.

"O *Grandpère!*" Dan cried impulsively. "I wish I could stay here!"

"Why?"

Dan did not answer that, just smiled affectionately at the old gentleman, opened his arms sweepingly, indicating "everything" by his gesture.

"Not just for—Berenicia—and, perhaps, me?"

"I love it *all*," said Daniel. "It seems to belong to me."

"Ah!"

"But I've got to go to work, sir. Done with loafing. I believe I'd like to play at work now."

"*Play* at it?"

"Yes, sir. I'll work better, if I play. But for the rest of my life, *Grandpère!* Oh! Listen, sir! I want to tell you all about it."

And with the embarrassment of a younger man unveiling himself to an elder, Dan bared his heart to his *Grandpère*.

The General listened, his hands on his cane, his eyes on the half-averted handsome head below him.

"I'm going to work. Have to be in Colorado, I suppose, if they'll take me back," Dan said at last. "*Grandpère*, do you think I'm really just a floater, do *you* think I'm a trifle light as air, because I've been content to play around with my mother?"

The General hated this boy's mother; but he loved and honored womankind; so he said, great-heartedly, "No. I think it's a fine thing to have made your mother happy."

"Why, *Grandpère!*"

"I have no doubt of your future. You do play the game; and that's a way of life. But it ought to be a man's game now, *mon fils*. You played your—other people's game, because, I find myself thinking, you had none of your own to play. It is time to make your—other people happy now, if you can, but without silencing your own life within, it would seem. For a man that is the main duty, not to—"

"Put out the Flame Within?"

"So. A boy plays many lives; but a man must play his own life. That is what he must play. Now that love—may I say?—has transmuted the boy into a man, a man's game you must play. That is why you want to work now for Berenicia."

"Whether or not, *Grandpère*. I want to *work*."

"You must forgive Berenicia. She—"

"Forgive! She was right. She woke me up."

"How far awake?"

"Sir?"

"How far awake?" You *want* Berenicia?"

"Oh! But I want her happy more. And there's Pinckney. And, besides,—and maybe this is reason enough, all alone, by itself," *Gai-Da* grinned. "The wise little lady said she wouldn't have me."

"You want Berenicia and you love to stay in this place. There is a flame within your family, my son. Bardés *get* what they want." But he added sympathetically in his own mind, "Except when their

will is opposed by your mother; I know. But I'll fight her in this boy now, by the help of heaven."

Dan half-read his thought, was silent a long while, then, "You find me a Bardé, *Grandpère*?"

"Yes. At base. The superstructure is a little more decorated than is usual with us," *Grandpère* chuckled. "But the foundations are of the old cypress,—and sound."

"Thank you. Honestly, I think they are, *Grandpère*."

"Son of my son!" said *Grandpère* tenderly, and a tear fell on his hands.

Daniel heard Vitesse's quick steps and Odrasse's whistle. He rose to join him; half-way to the gate he halted, arrested by a thought.

As they rode off together, he said to his friend, "If there's time, 'Drasse, let's make a detour and ride around to the old Bardé plantation,—that used to be Bardé. I feel that I'd like to look at the place to-day."

CHAPTER XIX

CLOSING IN

OUT on their secret marsh islet, Borel had at last persuaded the Prowler to tell him where he believed the treasure lay.

There seemed no longer any reason for concealing it from him; they were going together to retrieve it soon. And Prowler greatly preferred to share his confinement with a good-humored companion; this place was getting on his nerves anyway and Borel, with his injured whine, was trying.

Borel did become good-humored immediately, when he had what he wanted. He dug out of its cubby a hidden flask of out-lawed gin, shared it lavishly with Prowler; watched Prowler go to sleep, to sleep hard, in consequence.

Then Borel rowed away in the motor-skiff, its engine dead, to where his brother, Béqué, was waiting. After a quick passage with him, Borel rowed back to his sleeping mate, and Béqué returned across the Bay and up the Bayou.

Next day in the Salt Mine, Béqué had brought a message to Oreste, his brother's friend,—a strong, silent fellow, mistakenly called stupid.

There, in those subterranean snowy passages and glittering colonnades, Daniel Bardé, with the adaptability that had been both blessing and bane to him, had entered the confidence of the miners; a considerable feat, for these people were suspicious of strangers and did not understand his presence among them, nor the object of his notebooks and "survey." But they could not long resist his cheerful simplicity, especially when they found out that he was of "theirs." The grandson of General Bardé of Curéville,—General Odillon Bardé's descendant,—oh, that was altogether different; that!

Their taciturnity once broken, they told him all they knew, with their voluble candor. Dan soon understood that Oreste was Borel's intimate. As he went about with his charts and papers, making his survey of the mine for Mr. Ned, he kept a watchful eye upon him and upon Béqué Veriot.

Therefore, when he saw these two together in a sparkling corridor of salt,—like a cloister of white coral studded with multitudes of diamonds,—behind a shining salt column where neither of them just then had any reason to be, he stood still behind another pillar nearby. Though unseen by them, he pretended to be consulting his notebook.

"Hate to 'snoop'; but I reckon I'd better," he said to himself.

When he emerged casually, still reading, as if he had just come upon them, they separated quickly;

Béqué to disappear, Oreste to wait, regarding Daniel suspiciously.

His calm manner satisfied Oreste, though Daniel was excited; for he had learned more than the news of Borel's whereabouts for which he had been listening.

He hastened to Odrasse, and Odrasse to Berenicia; and now, in consequence, Mr. La Grande, his cheeks throbbing in two bright spots, and Berne, anxiously guarding him, met Odrasse and Daniel at conference in Obar's little house, in the afternoon.

Even in his own excitement, Mr. La Grande had to smile at Odrasse's youthful love of a mystery; he could see that this secret meeting by the ferry thrilled the boy.

Dan told them what he had overheard. "It is certain that Borel Veriot is in hiding in the marshes and will go with the others to the Pool o' the Moon to-morrow night. If we have the Sheriff near, we can certainly take him, and I think,—I couldn't get this quite straight,—that other man is still about, too."

Mr. La Grande's gentle face hardened a little at the thought of Prowler. But if Prowler were still about, there could be but one reason for his lingering!

"Why is he there? Why does Borel intend to go, with the others, to the Pool o' the Moon?" he asked.

Berne put her hand on his.

Dan replied, "They said, sir, to get something that was—*buried* there. They said that Borel had made the man tell the exact place where it,—so they said,—had been located."

"Berne! Fiammetta!" cried her father. "You see, dear! Nothing is impossible,—in a country with such a background! Oh! My dear!"

"Steady, Commodore!" she pled. "We're not sure, you know. Let's go slowly, honey."

Mr. La Grande controlled his excitement. "You are entitled to know why I hope," he said to the others. "Will you let me have some water, *madame*? Then I will tell you."

He confided in Daniel, Odrasse, Obar and Noalie the secret of Marcel Narcisse and his Shadow,—a story already known in part to Odrasse, for the ill-fated *Ombre-de-Marcel* was his great-uncle,—and of the search for the treasure.

When the eager inquiries had subsided and careful plans for the next night had been made, Berne drew Daniel out of doors. She said to him, as they stood on the little dock beside the ferry, in the mother-of-pearl twilight, "I'm worried about my father. If another disappointment should come now! I can't take stock in all this. It's too fantastic. Of course, treasure *has* been found. But it never seems to happen to any one you know,—like being struck by lightning. And, of course, we all grow up on the idea of pirates' treasure. Peter and the little boys are always either finding

treasure or burying some. You and I did, too. But for adults to take it seriously! What makes you trust it, Dan?"

"I'm not sure I do trust it. It does seem impossible. But, after you left me, honey, that day in the woods,—*that* day, Flame!"

"Yes; what happened then?"

"All right. I'll be a Spartan, resist the twilight and stick to the story." He laughed. "Stop looking at the lady, Dan, and keep your eye on the narrative. Just after you left me, I heard somebody in the distance; but it sounded nearby; you know how strangely sounds come and go in those swamps. I found it pretty far off when I tried to follow it, first in the canoe and later in the mire. The voices had stopped but I had the direction and soon heard them again at the dry end of the woods,—that spooky place."

"Pool o' the Moon."

"Yes. You'd just let slip a hint about treasure, you know. So, of course, I was eager. I acted as pirate-tale as I knew how and had slid out of the boat and crawled along and snaked over a mound and peeked. And I saw that man of whom Odrasse was suspicious—"

"The Prowler."

"Perfect name! I heard him sending that boy Borel away; it was evident that Borel didn't want to go, but he finally slunk off. And after following him a while and waiting, the other one came back

and I heard him on the other side of the mound, *digging*, my child. Wasn't that worth living for? Well, I wiggled about until I could see him. I tried not to take it too seriously. Till he found something."

"What did he find?"

"He stood in the only opening, at the base of the mound. The Pool made a reflection behind him; so I could see it plainly." He paused impressively.

"Go on, Da. What did he find?"

"It's called dramatic suspense, beautiful."

"Please, Dan!"

"Miss La Grande, then. I saw he had found an old rusty hinge, brass and heavy and obviously antique. Then,——" he paused. "Then!—It's very unromantic. Then I—sneezed!"

"Dan!" she laughed.

"Yip. What would R. L. S. think of me? And he rolled a log a few feet and then, quick as he could, hurried from it, hid his tools and got away, taking his hinge with him. Looked all around; but I'd chosen my spot well and he never found me. It was so still that I couldn't tell whether he'd actually left the woods or not; so *I* left warily. I meant to tell you about it, but they went for the birds and I decided the treasure was all nonsense and the hinge—just an old hinge. Besides, you'd indicated that I should leave the treasure idea alone until you'd asked Mr. La Grande to let me in on it. I supposed if anything *were* doing there, your

father knew of it. But when I heard Béqu  in the mine telling Oreste it was *sure* and to meet Borel at the Pool to-morrow night, I felt that maybe my babyhood dream had come true. Remember how we used to dream brigands and treasure-trove? Speaking of dreams forlorn, *mademoiselle*, I'm a working man."

"So glad."

"And I like it. Mr. Ned, your Great Gentlemen,—well, that's what he *is*! Just looked at me from the top of his great big still self in that great big quiet way he has, and never asked a single question; but seemed to get all I wanted to say, I hardly had to say it, even."

"He understands all creatures, however strange."

"Gave me work, as if it were the most natural request. And taught me! Say! That's a corking mine. Never knew salt could be so interesting!"

"Your mother is willing to have you stay longer,—work there?"

"She'll probably try to fetch me back, *pronto*. She isn't going to succeed, though. Poor little Mums!"

Berne could say nothing to that except, "It's so splendid that you're well, now; I'm sure that will make her happy. I'll get my father home. He must be kept quiet as can be until to-morrow night. It will be a trial."

"Better not let him come out there himself."

"Oh, I'll try not! He mustn't."

"No use asking *you* to keep away, I suppose?"

"I'll keep away if he does, to stay with him. 'Drasse is going to have the Sheriff come." She set her lips. "Treasure or not, we'll get those two for killing the birds. I dream about the fledglings!"

"Do you? I don't think I care for that. What a waste! You really ought not come to-morrow night, Flame. There may be danger."

"Oh! *You* be careful, Da!" He was startled by the pressure with which she grasped his arm.

His voice grew husky. "I'll be careful. Thank you. You know I'm well now. That day in the Cypress Crown proves it. Even in the midst of things, Caleb stopped to note what a husky invalid I'd become."

"He says you were a wonder."

"Um. Every time he tells the story I get more and more so; in a year or two I'll be tying Hercules,—to hear Caleb tell it. Good old scout! Flame, I want to tell you something. You were right in thinking I'd been a frivolous young waster. No; don't say anything! And you were right in preferring to rely on somebody who had made good." Berne started, remembering her Mater's idea. "I *got* what you said about not caring to consider me a—candidate for glory. So that's that, old lady. But I'd like to have you know that something's kind of crackling in my mind. I think there's a match at that kindling. Kind of

feel that I'd like to keep my fire going, if I can, sort of bright and ready, whether I ever get a—hearth—for it or not. So I'm going to have a try at it. I'd like to tell you what I wrote to my mother, if you'll listen."

"Listening."

"Told her I wanted to be her pal forever'n ever; but I tried to explain about the Flame Within and the nests—and that I couldn't loaf again somehow; that it was *that* the War and the shell-shock, too, maybe,—and other things that shall be nameless,—had unfitted me for. I said I'd play with her always, but that her playground would have to be near my work."

She put out her hand; shook hands with him like a man. He had to chuckle; that was so like Berne!

"I like the Salt Mine and I'm learning a lot; but Mr. Ned really *made* this place for me. I can see he won't need me when the survey's done. Of course, I can't hold on here. So I'm going back to Colorado.

"Dear, you said you were too disappointed in the man that baby-Da you're—in love with,"—again the engaging grin that Berne loved,—“had grown up to be. Well, I don't know how to say this without seeming conceited, when God knows that's the opposite of how I feel. But the memory of that kid-I-used-to-be,—I've been thinking this out hard,—is a sort of game *you* play with

your heart. Kind of fairy-story. You lonely little trump! 'Way off here! No dances or flirtations. Well, understanding that, as I think I do, I ought to tell you not to—to—let it keep you from any *real* thing. If conditions were different, easier, for you, maybe I couldn't seem to resign so heroically—what I ain't never had." *Gai-Da* tried to laugh.

Berne was still. Then, with the unembarrassed directness so precious to him, "Are you thinking of Martin Pinckney, Da? Because I'm not going to fall in love with him. We're friends."

He tried not to show relief. "You needn't tell me, dear. Just took him as a bright example because he looks to me easy to care for."

Berne held her lips tight. She would not let Daniel know how deeply she felt; it was better for him not to be bound, to go. If not, the Flame Within, would, please God, bring him back to her. Now, there was nothing to say.

Dan waited, longing, against his judgment, for her to say something that would give him a glimmer of hope of her. Then he said lightly, "Might as well know, while I'm telling you the rest of it, that you've only to say, '*à moi!*' at any time to me, Flame dear, and good old Dan'll come a-running. And there are no girls on earth but three: Camille, Berenicia, Marie. Here comes your father. *Au 'voir*, beautiful!"

"*Au'voir, Gai-Da!* Coming, Commodore!"
She went to her father.

Odrasse took her place beside Daniel. Dan saw tears in his eyes. Odrasse said hesitatingly, "It's all right, Bardé. It would be all right,—you and Berne. I'm like my great-uncle, I suppose. I could be *Ombre* to a man friend, just like him."

"You're too blithe and gay to be anybody's shadow, 'Drasse," Dan said, much moved by this confession. "And too *solid*. But I'd like a heap to be the fellow you chose for a friend, old man! I'm going away soon, 'Drasse. Soon as I finish the survey."

Odrasse put his arm through Daniel's. After awhile he said, "Got a whole lot to do before to-morrow. And I want to go home now and see what my *père* found; he's testing the water on the rice—for salt. It was so hot we were afraid the meter test wasn't safe; so he's trying the chemicals. Salt's sneaking up on us fast. We're testing for Mr. La Grande, too. Their field is nearer the Gulf. Good by until to-morrow night!"

"And good luck! Obar and I will go in together on time, according to orders. Hope Mr. La Grande keeps away. To-morrow night,—by Pool o' the Moon!"

CHAPTER XX

POOL O' THE MOON

THOUGH she tried to induce him to stay at home, Berne could not keep her father away from the scene of his hope, next evening.

Landry, unable to rest, hoping that word from Burden might have come to his office, had gone to the city accompanied by his faithful Mater.

Their departure made Mr. La Grande's way clear. With many misgivings, his daughter took her place in the buggy beside him and drove him through moonlit roads towards the Guidry woods.

Few penetrated the woods to the Pool o' the Moon, because of its inaccessibility and because there were so many better places for hunting and trapping.

Indeed, the singular absence of life about this strange spot had given it a bad repute.

It had an uncanny, a mysterious aspect.

Although on dry ground and well out of the swamp, the growth about it was dark and dense and high. Cypress and tupelo gave way to a crowding grove of tall and black magnolia trees.

These were just coming into bloom; their great globes of buds looked livid, like ghostly heads, in the dim darkness; and, at a later season, the red seeds fell like drops of blood.

Now the perfume was heavy and heady, and, mingled with it, came the fragrance of swamp jasmine and a queer, sharp, cool smell, found only here.

Vines thick and dank hung like an arras in an old tale, a voluminous curtaining circle, from one black tree to another.

Even at noonday, the sun's rays seldom reached this leafy cavern; only it turned softly to a silvery twilight in which the round pool itself glimmered faintly, like a fading moon.

Back in the grove, sudden mounds of high ground rose unexpectedly; perhaps they were Indian burial places, perhaps the constant slipping of the earth had brought the swamp so near them; perhaps they were another instance of the strange formation hereabout, thought to be due to the salt.

Though it lay so near the swamp, the land about Pool o' the Moon was solid and, for that flat country, high.

Obar and Daniel were already hidden in the forest.

A game warden sat in a motor-skiff on the canal shore; another, beside the distant bayou; to stop escape in either direction by water. All the possible roads were watched. Vitesse and the Sheriff's

roan mare, side by side, were bearing their riders to the dry path in the Guidry woods; at a distance, Berne's buggy followed them.

Her father sat erect and still. Only twice he spoke. "The letter says that the amount is large; my dear. Very large. Not only in valuables. Money, too. A whole strongbox of treasury notes. And there is a hint of the—Lafitte hoard, too,—but we'll not count on that." And later, "I hope our people will not show themselves too soon,—before the place is indicated. It would not do to scare them off prematurely."

"Every one is going to keep off until Obar fires a signal," she assured him. "He'll watch Borel closely."

Borel knew the strange pool by day or night and, with a talisman of his mother's in his pocket, had no fear of its alleged diabolical visitors, as he approached it now at nightfall.

The covert where Prowler and Borel had hidden was far from this spot; even in Prowler's motor-skiff it had been necessary for Borel to start off early in the morning.

So, at dawn, while the unsuspecting Prowler still slept heavily, wrapped in his mosquito-netting, on the cabin floor, Borel had arisen cautiously.

The Prowler slept with his coat for a pillow; and in the pocket was that map. Borel had not been able to get it; but he knew the spot now; that was enough.

The mosquito-netting was rolled about Prowler. A very good thing! It enabled Borel to tie him up in it with a rope, almost before the Prowler was enough awake to struggle. Then, with the Prowler's curses ringing in his ears, frightening him beyond reason, Borel had slipped into the motor-skiff, set the engine going fast and made his way to the bay's mouth.

There, a friendly launch, engaged by Oreste and Béqué for the day, ostensibly for fishing, had received and hidden him in its cabin.

Now, their journey nearly over, in that mother-of-pearl twilight, up the bayou they were trailing with a good "catch" of fish and Borel under cover.

Every little while he laughed aloud at the Prowler's predicament. "But no! I did not tie him very tight. I did not want he should not draw free for something to eat; heh? But just to keep him busy for awhile. *Et, alors!* He has no boat. He must stay there. I have take' his boat. Next time he will think more long before to name Borel the name of a fool. Heh? I did not hurt him; no. And I put beside him a bottle of my gin. Oh, I have some heart; me!"

But Borel should have remembered that the Prowler was resourceful. Having at last freed himself, he climbed to the cabin-roof, waved the mosquito-netting, waved his coat, halloed to the boats that passed. But, as these were few and far

out on the water,—the inlet was a blind alley,—they neither saw nor heard him.

He tore a board from the cabin floor and made a bridge of it from the doorstep to one of the small shell-islands. He gathered all the dry reeds he could reach and spread them in the cabin and on the roof. Then he waited until he saw a schooner looming in the distance. When it had come close enough for his purpose, he set fire to the reeds, in the point where it crosses the canal.

The breeze was brisk and the whirling flames soon attracted attention. His figure silhouetted against them brought the vessel,—a fishing boat from down the coast,—within hailing distance. The yarn he told so far satisfied the crew that they consented to take him up Bayou Vermilion as far as the point where it crosses the canal.

As they sailed up the bayou, Prowler lay on his face, pretending to sleep. Occasionally he took a mouthful from Borel's bottle; and each drink made him angrier with the donor.

When they put him off at evening at the confluence of the two streams, he moved rapidly into the woods.

Not so rapidly, however, but that Caleb, the fisherman, saw him with his keen eyes. Caleb whistled softly, left his boat by the marge of the canal and, soft-footed as an Indian, followed the Prowler, toward the Pool o' the Moon, where now, Dan and Obar, concealed in the black thicket back of

the mounds smoked their pipes to keep off the mosquitoes, and waited.

The pool was the moon's pool, indeed, that night, a night so brilliant that, even in this black forest, vague brightnesses flickered through, eerily lighting a leaf or bud, a patch of water. The open place of the pool itself, that in the daylight glimmered like the wraith of a moon, now in the moonlight glowed a dulled and mystic mirror. It shone dim and still as death.

At a rustle of steps and voices, Obar and Dan emptied their pipes, stood alert.

Oreste, Béqué and Borel came, carrying lanterns and shovels. They were gay, the more circumspect Oreste occasionally checking the hilarity of the others.

At a point within reach in the Guidry woods, Odrasse and the Sheriff now waited, too. Behind them, Berne and her father were steadily approaching.

And, by clumsy and mistaken paths that tried the patience of Caleb following in his wake, the Prowler was making angry progress.

At a point just across the weird, white-edged pool, Dan could see Borel lift a heavy log from the base of a mound. Oreste held a lantern for him. Under the log some one had been digging a trench.

With a cry, the three youths set to work rapidly with their shovels, the lanterns on the ground beside them.

Obar and Daniel held their breath as the earth flew about the diggers, now deep in the trench.

Excited as he was, Daniel, watching them, wondered at the peculiarity of the soil. In this location, the hole, man-deep, should have been full of water, or at least, even allowing for the drainage down the mound, should have been very muddy. But apparently dry enough, the three kept on digging, doggedly.

Borel was beginning to swear with impatience, with doubt, with fear of disappointment, when his brother Béqué gave a shout.

"Hé! La boîte! La voici!"

Shouting all three, they were lifting a box of considerable size to the surface, and Obar had his pistol raised to fire the signal—when another shot rang through the forest, followed by a cry.

Thinking this to be Obar's signal, Odrasse on Vitesse and the Sheriff on his roan crashed through the woods; the riders sprang from their horses, ran to the pool.

There, Obar and Daniel already had "covered" the trench.

Into the trench, a line of warm young blood was flowing.

The Prowler, his pistol still smoking in his hand, stood on the edge of this grave that Borel had dug for himself.

When he saw Dan and Obar, Prowler cried, with a horrid gasp, "You damn traitor!" to the

dead boy lying at his feet. "To bring them in it, too! I thought you was alone!" as if explaining to the dead why he had dared to take the risk of murdering him.

When Berne and her father came, the Sheriff had the Prowler; Dan and Odrasse were working in vain over Borel, and Béqué was weeping wildly on the shoulder of the silent Oreste. From the other direction, Caleb came running.

The Prowler saw the newcomers, turned a look of malevolence upon them. He was opening his lips curiously, an astonished expression growing in his eyes, as if it were just dawning upon him, what he had done in his gin-stimulated rage.

Berne made her father sit upon a log, lean against her.

"It ends in the death of another young man," he said. "It is horrible." He was miserably shaken.

To him, after a little, Obar brought the box.

Mr. La Grande did not take the anticipated triumph in it, of course, with this tragedy before him; still, he could not but feel a tremendous hope. If the box contained what he expected to find in it, he was justified; his son, his plantation, were safe.

As the box lay before him, he exclaimed, almost beyond speech, gaspingly, "Look! Daughter! Look! My grandfather's monogram! Look! It is *that* box. Please open it, Obar,—Odrasse."

But when Berne's eyes, following that trembling

finger, fell upon the box, she turned white as chalk, threw her arms about him in an anguish of protection, cried out, "No! No! It isn't! It isn't! Oh, my dear! My dear!"

"Why, Flame! What? What?"

They had opened the box.

On its deep floor there lay tarnished tinsel ornaments, old but all too modern, left from some Christmas tree, many "dollars" of tin-foil and the tops of pop-bottles, "jewels" of broken glass, and—but what matter? Trash lay in the box. Contemporary trash.

Mr. La Grande turned a helpless, bewildered, piteous face to his daughter. "What is it? What is it?" he asked feebly.

Berne's own lips were trembling so that she could hardly speak.

"Oh, darling! Darling!" she said, her arms about her father. "It's *Peter's* treasure. Peter—one day in the beginning of his vacation—Brazile and Alligator-man took him and Karl for a day in the woods. Pete asked me to let him take an old empty chest from the attic,—the broken one with a loose clasp—to play pirate." She sobbed. "He said—Brazile was going to show him a dandy place. Of course, I could never dream they'd go so far, come *here!* Peter *often* plays pirate. O Commodore! I'd told Pete to bring the chest back home—and I thought he had. Brazile and Alligator-man must have found this trench begun; they can

see anything in the woods, both of them. *This* must have been the 'dandy place'! They must have helped the boys dig deeper and—buried their box—and fixed it up to look the same so it wouldn't show again, I suppose. You know how skilful in the woods they both are, and Brazile's like a child himself when he plays with the little boys. I'm just *guessing* all this; I don't know just what happened, of course. But that man," she pointed to the blanched and shaking Prowler. "That man must have found, after awhile—when *he* began digging there again,—that old loose hinge! Dan saw him find one. All the hinges, clasps, have *La Grande* engraved on the metal, you see. He must have thought—O Commodore!" She could not go on.

This thing was a ghastly joke. *A joke!* It was that that made it so tragic.

Mr. La Grande dropped his head in his hands. "And that boy—is *dead*—for *this!*" he mourned.

A terrific hysterical guffaw from Prowler brought them all, right about, towards him. He had just realized—poor devil!—for what a prize he had killed a man.

Mr. La Grande pulled himself together. "No use staying here. I thank all you gentlemen." He rose unsteadily.

A joke! Child's play. A joke. He kept saying it in his mind. The horrible part of it was that it was all so natural,—just a trick of life!

Rather funny, but for Borel's death. He began to think of the boy's mother.

His daughter and Obar led him away. The Sheriff and Odrasse, who was unshamedly weeping, followed, guarding their prisoner. Oreste and Béqué came after them, bearing their dead.

Motioning Caleb to stay with him, Dan Bardé went back to the Pool o' the Moon.

He had washed his hands in its strange water after his attempt to revive Borel, bending so low over it that some water had splashed into his face. Since then he kept regarding it.

Now, he watched the others out of sight, leaned over the pool again.

Then he flashed his pocket light into the pool and into that trench of death and disappointment.

He took up a shovel and began to dig.

After a few words, Caleb took another.

They were still digging when the morning turned the Pool o' the Moon from its ghostly to its witchy gleam.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN WHO HAD EVERYTHING

MR. LA GRANDE'S collapse would have been more severe but for the fine mettle of the man under his surface weakness. He had the feminine quality of being better able to bear a catastrophe than the fear of one.

He slept on through the morning, after he had fallen into the sleep of exhaustion for what remained of that trying night.

Berne had given her directions for the day and returned home before he awoke and rang for his coffee.

She brought it to him herself.

"Kind of a—joke—on me, Flame!" he suggested.

"Nothing like having a sense of humor, Commodore," she smiled back at him. "Better 'stay put' all day to-day. Don't get up, dear."

He nodded obedience.

He could not help thinking of how ridiculous this story, how absurd his part in it, would seem in the telling,—the frequent, inevitable and endless telling throughout "the parish." But at least peo-

ple would not let him see their amusement; for that he could thank their traditional courtesy. It would make it much easier for him.

Berne felt his thought. "We're not the only family in the parish who've looked for treasure at one time or another, Commodore," she said lightly. "You'd be astonished to know how often some Baratarian legend has been revived and has set people going."

"What a *man*, you are, daughter!"

"Just what I was thinking about *you*, Commodore."

His eyes grew moist. "I fear your mother and Landry may not be so—admiring," with a sorry smile. "The story is 'out' now. When they return to hear—"

"That's just what I wanted to talk about. Reckon I'll run into the city and tell them myself. I'd like to be the first to do it. I'm sure that would be better than having it—happen here. And I want to go to New Orleans to-day, anyway. You be all right in Singsie's care? And Peterkin's. Pete says he'll 'sick' Gamin on you if you break training. If anything *should* go wrong, telephone to Nell Droussard. She's always envied me my Dad; be glad to come."

"I'm all right. Thank you, for going. It will be a blessed relief to me not to have to explain. Poor Landry! I had so hoped—" He caught himself.

"Go on hoping, honey. We may fix it for him still."

When in a little while she gave him a good-by kiss, his cheeks were wet and he said, "I lie here doing nothing while you face the music."

"You lie there getting well, please, sir. And, in between whiles, if you're wanting to do something else useful, darling, *pray for rain!*"

Mater and Landry were having their evening meal in their apartment in New Orleans when Berne appeared.

"Everybody's all right!" she hastened to say; Mater looked so frightened at the sight of her. Anxiety about her husband's health tapped more often and more sharply at the frivolous little lady's heart than one might have supposed.

Mater's eyes were sunken, her mouth drooping. Like most people with a superabundance of surface gaiety, she had little real composure under strain.

Berne looked at her with an immense pity. If ever any one were born to be rich and happy, it was this poor little Mater, she thought.

She told them about the hunt for treasure, giving them the end of the story first, to avoid their disappointment. But that method failed of its effect; they were both overwhelmed by Mr. La Grande's having been fleeced for such an end, at his having made them ridiculous.

"That's the way things go with us!" cried Mater. "It's La Grande luck. Oh! I wish I

were dead!" she sobbed and wrung her hands.

"Luck!" Landry exclaimed bitterly. "It's Father's colossal blindness. Why on earth didn't he tell *us*; tell you, Mater; tell *me*? Somebody who would have made a real investigation, somebody who wouldn't be taken in by a fairy-tale!"

Berne ignored the thrust at her, but could not help defending her father. "He probably felt himself to be as astute as you are, Landry. Please don't make it any harder for Father. His chief disappointment was for you."

"God! If he'd considered me before he sank that money! And you, Camille,—letting him deal with shady customers like that and not telling anybody!"

"Think I'd a right to, when Commodore said not?"

Landry thrashed about exasperated. "*Right!* You bet I do! Look what a hole you put me in! If I had that money—"

"Nobody's put you in a hole but yourself," Berne said. "You're in no position to criticize Commodore. You've been 'done' yourself, and by the same gang."

"Landry made a perfectly natural mistake," Mater defended. "The man had done business with Lan and his bank references were sound; and if your father had been able to see him through his difficulties, Landry wouldn't have *needed* those advances."

"Oh!" Landry said with an air of taking unjust blame with patience, "doubtless my fault!"

Berne thought it undoubtedly his fault, but she held back the retort.

"I'm not making a case against Landry," she said. "Just reminding him not to blame Commo-dore for the same—misfortune. Mater, Commo-dore can't *stand* being blamed."

Her mother blanched. Then, with a flash of her old spirit, "I don't need you to tell me how to treat your father, Berne!"

"Oh! I *know* it, dear!"

"Well!"

"If we only could have gotten rid of that plantation!" Landry cried. "That's where everything's sunk."

Berne rose sharply. "I've heard that enough. It's not true. The plantation's saved you every time you've needed saving. You'd have gone smash long ago but for it. It's the only hope now, —if it rains."

"What? If what?"

"Yes. There's a little too much salt in the bayous for the rice. We never had such an early drought. So! You *do* depend on the plantation, after all!" she said grimly, seeing Landry's shocked face. "I don't want to worry you, Mater. It'll be all right, I still feel sure. But I'm fed up with this talk against the land that supports us. I know I'm a failure as a manager; I'm the worst failure

of all,—even with Mr. Jonas watching and helping me so. But Imaginaire *has* fed and housed and *backed* us in spite of being drained dry,—no ready money,—nothing put back in the land,—and Comodore ill,—and an amateur like me—I won't have Imaginaire blamed! Especially if we have to lose it—after all!”

Landry felt a compunction. “My goodness, Sis! I haven't said anything against the old place. You don't understand. Only we *haven't* got much out of it. Facts are facts.”

His mother nodded.

Berne regretted her outburst. “This doesn't *arrive*; does it? Point is, what to do now.”

“I've tried everything.”

“Did you ask Martin?”

Her mother looked up, a quick hope in her eyes.

“Martin!” Landry laughed drily. “How can I? With Martin wanting to marry you? If you *were* going to marry him, or if he didn't want you to, I'd ask him in a minute. He'd never feel it. But I guess you've shut that off for me pretty sharp.”

“It's the disappointment of my life,” Mater sighed. “I stood Berne's opposition, Martin's amusement,—everything. Even being thought mercenary. You and your father have no monopoly on disinterested motives, my dear!”

“O Mater!”

"When you're my age you'll realize what advantages like Martin's mean to a wife. Not only position and wealth. Mind, character, disposition, breeding, good looks. The man has *everything*,—everything! What on earth can you want?"

Berne said only, "Landry, if you had help now, could you pull out? Are you reasonably sure?"

"Yes. That's the devil of it." He put his head in his hands.

"Martin in town?" Berne asked and sat in silence long after Landry had said "Yes."

Her mother regarded her anxiously. At last she drew a chair beside her and said under her breath, "Dear,—I hope you're not planning anything sacrificial—for our sakes."

Half of her did hope that, frightened at the thought of it; but half of her wanted it, believing it would be happier even for Berne herself in the end.

Berne stared, then laughed.

"You mean—marry Martin! Without loving him! As if I could—even if *he* wanted to! I'm too poor a liar for that."

"I did not assume that you'd lie to him," sharply.

"Not to him. To the Flame. Don't worry, Mater. Of course, I won't."

Her mother shrugged wearily, soon withdrew for the night. Berne rose when she did so, wanting

to kiss her, comfort her; but it was to Landry Mater turned for that caress. She managed to convey to her daughter a sense of injury.

Oh! She did not wish Berne to marry him, not wanting to; but she wanted Berne to want to marry him!

"Elodi came on the train with me, Lan," Berne said, when she had gone.

"I know. Wrote to me. Suppose I ought to call."

"Oh, no! Elodi'd rather not."

"What do you mean?"

"She told me on the train she'd quarreled with you about 'Drasse. Said she didn't like you as much as she had."

"Oh, *that!*" He laughed. "Expected you to tell me, of course."

"But I told her I was *glad* of it."

"Why on earth—"

"Elodi asked me that, too. I said because I was afraid she was getting a 'crush' on you."

"What did she say to that?"

"She said, 'Afraid!' And asked me why *afraid*. I told her it was because I liked her so well."

"You—"

"That's all. But Elodi's no fool. She *got* what I meant."

Elodi had turned pale but had taken the message straight and thanked Berne with her hurt eyes.

Landry was furious. "I'll thank you to keep out of my business, Camille."

"This was Elodi's and *she* thanked me. I'll keep in your business just once more, Lan; then out forever after."

"What are you talking about?"

"Good night." Then, "Friends? Even if I did intrude. I don't often; you know."

Something in her face made him kiss his sister. "As if we weren't always friends!" he said. "You just imagine things."

In the morning, Martin Pinckney's secretary brought him to his feet with more emotion than he would have cared to show, by saying, "Miss La Grande to see you, sir."

"Berne!" Martin cried as she entered; then, quickly, "Nothing wrong, I hope!"

"Heaps!"

"May I help?"

"That depends."

"On what? Tell me, little friend."

"You mean that, Martin, don't you? Literally?" as she sat beside him.

"Mean what?"

" 'Friend.' "

"You know I'm your friend, child. It's not like you, Candidissima, to speak in riddles. Tell me what's on your mind. Do you object to my taking this off?"

"My hat? Wait until I get the hat-pin out, please. I'd like to keep the hair on."

"Now let's move your chair into that sunray. What a conflagration! Now, you may look out over the city and enjoy the view from there; and I'll be seeing a 'pretty,' myself."

She knew he was putting her at ease and was glad of the moment's respite. She obediently looked out over the little houses of lower New Orleans with their hanging balconies of iron lace and potted plants, over their varied roof-line to the broad silver sweep of the distant river; while Martin looked at her.

Then she told him about her father's troubles, the burdens upon the plantation, the tragic treasure-hunt, about the worn-out pump and the broken tractor that delayed the crop, the threatened drought that might destroy it. She told him how nothing but a good season and patient creditors could save Imaginaire.

Several times he tried to interpose, to offer help; but every time she stopped him.

"No, Martin; please! I've taught myself this little speech like a lesson. Let me say it through, or I'll lose my place." She smiled, but he saw that she had really schooled herself. And at last, "I know you're just perishing to say, 'Let me help!' But you can't,—in anything I've already told you. I just told it to set the stage, so you'll understand conditions."

"Why can't I help?"

"Father's affair. And he'd never borrow another cent on the place from *anybody* unless the crop's good and he can do some paying off. Wouldn't be fair, for the poor old plantation is already owing all it can possibly pay. We've got to depend on a crop. No; that's *settled*, Martin. It's something else you can help in; maybe."

"I will, of course. Tell me."

She hesitated.

"Is it—Landry? I've been hearing. Had breakfast with Cor—with a man this morning, who suspected—"

"It's Landry. But I've got to talk about something else first; before I tell you. Before I can let you help."

Martin Pinckney knew more about Landry's misadventures than Berne thought; more, perhaps, than Berne did herself. And he knew the family's fine temper; knew they'd let the plantation go before disgracing Landry.

His eyes full of pity and tenderness, he waited for her to tell him, watching for the opportunity to spare her as much of the recital as he could.

Oh! How easy it would be for him to lift this entire load, if Heaven and Berne would let him! Something within him rejoiced at her coming to him now; surely she must like him better than she knew, to come! But, also, something within him

darkly denied this; if she thought of him as a lover she would not have come.

He waited.

"Landry's trouble is serious. I asked him, Martin, why he had not come to you for help." Berne spoke slowly. "I knew that you could help him more easily than any other friend. And I knew that you would. So I asked him. Mater would be horrified at what I'm going to say; and I reckon it *isn't* ladylike. But friendship is bigger than—delicacy, I think. And yours is very big to me."

"Berne—"

"Wait, please. And my love for my brother and—Ile Imaginaire, and all of them, is bigger than delicacy, too. Martin," she lifted her honest eyes and spoke frankly, like an embarrassed but straightforward boy. "Landry didn't ask your help because he and Mater and even my father—and others, they say,—misunderstand our friendship. I told them you are my friend; but they think you are in love with me." Her voice scarcely faltered. He dropped his eyes. "So they could not ask you for help for Landry. But I feel sure it is not so. Why, at first Mater thought *I* was in love with *you*. And if she could mistake my friendship, whom she should know better than she does you, of course she could mistake yours, too."

Martin clenched his hand on the arm of his chair.

"It seemed to me a dreadful thing to keep Landry from your help on a misapprehension. So, as

you and I are always candid, and like candor in each other, I thought I'd do what I'd want a friend to do to me. I knew it was better,—though it doesn't seem as easy as I thought,—simply to ask you. I'm sure *I* know the answer. But I want to tell Lan you said so."

Martin smiled at her.

"The line between friendship and—love, Berenicia, is delicate. Can one always be sure?" His manner was light but he watched her keenly.

"Oh, yes! Of course, one can be sure!"

"You—*know* that, Candidissima?" with an attempt at archness.

"Yes. I know it, Martin. I thought you knew I did." Her color deepened.

He would cut clean, no matter how it hurt. He must be sure he had to, before he lied to her.

"Young Bardé, of course?"

"Of course."

"Candidissima, my dear, come here." He rose and she did, too.

He took her hands, he looked into her eyes.

"Go home and tell Landry to come to me, or else I shall come to him. Tell him your friendship is the best thing on this earth to me—and—more valuable than anybody's sweethearting could be. But it's only friendship, little Berenicia. I'm a bachelor by birth," he grinned. "Immutable."

"I knew it, dear Martin,—about the friendship. But I'm glad I asked. There *was* a little sneaking

doubt," she was frank, as always. "And to hurt you would be unbearable."

"You conceited little monkey!" he teased. "Friends forever, Berne?"

"Oh, yes, dear!"

"And you *will* send Landry; let me help?"

"Just as you would do to me, if I could help you. And, thank you!"

"For nothing. Let *me* put that hat on for you?"

"All but the hat-pin, please."

He stood behind her, softly laid his cheek against her hair; then placed the hat upon her head with deft and precise fingers.

"Now, don't worry, honey. You're a dear to have come to me," he said.

When she had gone, he locked the door of his office, telephoned to his secretary not to disturb him.

Then he went to the window, stood long, looking over the roofs of the houses hung with iron-lace to the silver curve of the river.

"The only thing I ever wanted! In all my life. The only thing I ever really wanted!" the man who had everything said to himself.

CHAPTER XXII

WAITING

WHEN Berne reached the apartment, Landry had just come home to lunch with his Mater, to please that worried little lady, and to be comforted. Her indomitable admiration bolstered his self-respect.

Landry now acknowledged that there was no hope of Burden, and his note was almost due. He had more than a suspicion that Tom Corbin was 'on' and had been talking. Berne found him reciting his despair to poor little Mater.

"Cheer up, Landry!" Berne cried. "You're to go to Martin right away. He says he'll see you through."

Mater sprang to her feet. "Berne! You didn't—"

"Not that, of course. And you were all mistaken. I was right. Martin isn't in love with me. He said so."

"*Said so?*"

"Yes. I asked him."

"You—" Mater saw it all. "Oh! You little fool! You little fool! You have thrown

away—" she began; but stopped at the sight of Landry's face quivering with relief. After all, Landry was saved; this was gained and, perhaps, the other not lost either. In time! Perhaps all the more likely because of Berne's gratitude for this friendship!

Landry, too, disbelieved Martin's disclaimer; but he took the goods the gods provided, thanked and kissed his sister. Camille *was* a brick; he was going to try to be more useful to her.

But when, bidding him good-by as he left them after luncheon, Berne said, "Now, Lanny dear, watch your step; won't you? We have to be mighty careful now," he drew back, offended.

"I suppose I'll have to take that. But I'm managing my end of the business quite as well as—anybody."

Berne took the implied *tu quoque* good-naturedly. "No need to be on the defensive, Lan. Just a friendly warning."

"Thanks. But it's not needed."

"We, all of us, do have to be careful, though, in every way," Mater admonished. "I must be economical. Your father must be cautious. And I can see where you're making pretty big mistakes yourself, Berne."

Mater was alluding to the matter of Martin and Daniel, but Berne thought that she, too, was criticizing the management of the plantation. Her nerves

were worn through. The fire leaped to her eyes.

"Very well!" she cried. "If I'm no good on the plantation, manage it yourselves. I'm done."

"Why, Berne!" from the astonished Mater.

"I'm tired of being told about my shortcomings and Commodore's. I'm tired of being treated as if I held on to the plantation, because I preferred toiling from morning to night. Mater's said so often that I'm not a regular *girl*, that she's come to believe it. I'm working like a hired man, so that Lan can do what he likes to do. If you can find any one to run Imaginaire better, hire him. Let Landry find a way to pay him."

Mater suddenly perceived her daughter.

"I told you Berne had her same old temper!" Landry said, laughing. "You thought—"

"Thought I had no feelings at all. Because I'm able to control—" then she laughed shortly, and did control them. "I'm not showing much control now, I'll admit," she said, setting that chin and lip. "I'm pretty tired. But I mean what I said."

Mater spoke gently. She was seeing Berne as she was, for the first time in years. Her daughter was right; they *had* been taking her for granted, had been accepting her service without thanks, her poise for hardness; had been using up her girlhood.

"But we all need you, daughter. Nobody could do what you have done for us. As soon as we *can*, we will hire a man, Berne. But you'll bear with

your family, till then?" smiling through tears. Mater was flirting with Berne, as she did with her men. She had not done this before. Berne liked it, softened.

"For Pete and Commodore,—even if Lan and I talk as if we didn't love you; though we *do*!" Mater pleaded.

Berne astonished herself by bursting into tears. She hid them on the sofa-cushion. Mater sat beside her, motioning Landry to go, put her arms about her daughter.

"I've wanted you so!" Berne thought silently, and Mater may have felt it. At any rate, her own tears, this time, at least, were deeper than the surface. Mater was ashamed.

But Mater's reactions would not have wholly pleased her daughter. She was making up her mind that Berne should come into town more often, have more of social life, see more of Martin Pinckney in his own environment. She was going to help Martin all she could. That was the real way out for Berne.

Mater wanted everybody to be happy,—in Mater's way.

And, in spite of her sympathy, she said, pursuing her own purposes, as always, when Berne had dried her eyes, "Not going to desert us yet, after all; are you? You'll give us another chance, honey? You'll wait?"

And, of course, Berne replied, "Certainly, Mater. I'll stay on my job."

When Berne, on her job, got back to Curéville, Mme. Boutin's car was in the little plaza cooling off after a long ride in the flaming sun. And Mme. Boutin herself was sitting on the steps of the red-brick-and-white church, fanning vigorously with a braid-bound palm-leaf fan. She had just purchased a tin-cupful of figs from a "French" colored woman who stood before her, looking dark and cool in her blue calico dress and black sun-bonnet, a leaf-thatched wicker basket on her arm. Mme. Boutin's "water waves" of hair were plastered to her perspiring forehead; and the very beads of jet she wore seemed moist.

"Hé! Camille Berenicia!" she cried. "*Venez-ici!* Come here, Camille! Have some fig'? No? You come by the train and not look so warm like me who drive this car. This car, she is not an automobile. Oh, no, no! She is a stove on the wheels. The sun from the top, she bake me and the engine from the bottom, she broil me! Hé! And the bomp-bomp turn me over till I'm done. Hé, hé! It is a great pleasure to be the owner of such a *machine d'enfers*. For my sins I buy me that automobile!" She laughed and jingled. "You go somewhere? I can take you somewhere in my car, maybe?"

"Just going to see *Oncle Jubat*; thank you. I'll

walk; it's so near. And Hope will call for me later."

"But Judge Julien is not at home. This is the day he goes every week to visit General Bardé. I pass to there, too, me, when I get my breath and the automobile, she get *her* breath. *Tiens!* You walk very slowly, I come along with you. We leave that devil to pant and groan by herself."

They found the two gentlemen on the cool Bardé porch back of the oak-walk, discussing a letter. With neighborly candor, they told these established friends its contents, while Mme. Boutin and Berne seated themselves and waited for the cooling drink old Baptiste went to get for them.

"I have the honor to have received at last," the General said with a tinge of sarcasm, "a letter from my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Maude Bardé. That is to say a letter with a *personal* import, as well as the necessary business."

Berne's cheek flushed and faded. Mme. Boutin lifted her shoulders and tilted all her chins. "She has taken her time. It must be that she desires something," was her silent comment.

"I confess that I do not understand the letter," the General continued. "Why it comes, or what it signifies."

"Perhaps you do not understand because you are prejudiced against the lady," Judge Julien Le Boeuf suggested gently. "And I do not believe Mme.

Boutin will decrease the pressure of that." He laughed. "Eh, Amitilde?" he asked her.

"You have right," said Mme. Boutin.

"I have no wish to be unjust to any one," said General Bardé.

Mme. Boutin snapped her eyes. "The letter, what is it that she say'?" she asked.

It began with graceful phrases, apologetic offerings of friendship, so prettily turned that even General Bardé acknowledged their *finesse*. Then, it said, that Daniel had written of his interest in the parish, of the good it was doing him,—even in that hot summer time which she so well remembered,—and of his desire to stay as long as he could and then go West to work at his profession. Dear Daniel feared her loneliness and—alas!—her opposition. They *had* been a couple of youngsters together. Oh, well! She had learned that children will grow up and leave even young parents. Perhaps, she suggested, this was her prescribed penance for having taken dear Olivier from his father.

The 'General's words bit as he read this.

The letter said that Daniel would never believe it from her, she feared; would not General Bardé make Daniel understand that she was really quite willing, or at least quite *ready* to let him go? But she really thought it his duty to see her first. Did not General Bardé think Dan ought to visit her before going West? She would not make it hard for

him; she would not cry. Only one playtime more! She was writing to her son asking him to come *now*, at a very good time, while she was at Southampton before going into the hills. Please, General Bardé, persuade him to do so, without delay, if the matter should be discussed. She assured him that she had a good reason for wanting Dan just at that time. Dan had said that he had duties which held him. Do persuade him to come now, nevertheless. It was important.

Then the letter dealt with other matters and the General ceased to read it aloud. "Why do you suppose she writes all this to *me*?" he asked.

"My opinion?" Mme. Boutin said. "She wish' to get him there to view this noble sacrifice,—so he will relent, and prevent it. She wish' to get Daniel among his old companions in idleness,—I ask your pardon my General!—and she believe the charm of Louisiana and also of industry has,—I ask thy pardon, Camille Berenicia!—has *red hair*. She think' she will break new charm with old! She has no grand confidence in our Dan's ambitions. She is astute. Oh, *oui*!"

"You think she is trying to get the boy away from *me*," with a glance toward Berne sitting silent on the step. "And is asking me to help?" General Bardé demanded.

Mme. Boutin shrugged. "How should I know? Only I think she has some selfish object; this one

or some other. Me, I do not accept this sacrifice. *C'est tout.*"

"Oh, come, my good friends!" Judge Julien waved a deprecatory hand. "Let us not ascribe motives. It's dangerous practice. My dog chased a negro out of the yard last night, thinking him after chickens, and all the poor fellow wanted was to propose to our yellow Hortense. He thought she had 'sicked' the dog on him; so paid his addresses to another. Now Hortense departs in dudgeon. Thus we are losing the best cook in the five parishes! All through ascribing motives!"

They laughed and the Judge continued seriously, "It would be well not to be guided by prejudice; yes? This pretty, graceful child-wife of Olivier; I did not know her as well as either of you—"

"That is evident," said Mme. Boutin. "Listen! You think I distrust her because she have married Olivier, whom I expect to marry me. Ah, you *do*! Well, I loved Olivier. *Si*. It is so. He rather this child. I am disappoint'. It is true. But I have not die' of it. I have espoused me a good husband; I am a devote' wife, a loyal widow. I use his name still, Mme. Adrian Boutin; not Mme. Amitilde, as she does Mrs. Maude. *Bien!* You excuse her, you think, 'She is only light; if you drop her out the window she will blow up, not fall down.' I don't think so; me. I say she is very deep, very *rusée*. I say I think she is a 'pretty,

graceful'—*pig*. Oh, yes, she is—how you say?—very cute. But a cute white pig is as much *pig* as a ogly black one. So!"

"Dan did not want to go," said the General with an innocent gleam of triumph. "But it was not for fear of confronting her."

"What was his reason?" Berne inquired.

"Duty. Ned needed him."

"The survey is not done, then?"

The General blushed, looked embarrassed. "Ye-es. But Ned had another task for him; and time is an object. I advised Daniel to consult Ned about it. You will probably hear the result before I do," he added slyly.

And he was right. When Berne, after her consultation with "*Oncle Jubat*," rode toward *Imagin-aire*, Dan was waiting for her there.

She had had her first leap of the heart before she saw him.

"Uncle Hope!" she cried joyfully as her eyes fell on the rice. "You've had a shower."

"Yas'm. Li'l bitty shower. It'll help some; but it won't help much nor long. Howsomebber, maybe mo' rain will come. 'Say *thanky* fo' a blackberry if you can't get a watermillion.' Dat's what de old folks say. Yas, Lawd. Mist' Dan'l's up to de house. You's lookin' awful pretty, Missy," with a twinkle in his eye.

The air was as glamorous with the opal after-

glow, a few fireflies were rising in it. Under a crepe-myrtle tree covered with pendant pinky clusters, Daniel sat telling fairy-tales to Peter and Beetee and Shoestring, before him on the petal-strewn grass.

Berne smiled as she saw him from the buggy. He was telling his tale with the bright ardor that won old and young.

How much seriousness lay beneath it? Was his desire to work just an enthusiastic whim that he believed in for the moment? Or had she taken his own light estimate of himself too gravely? Her constant question! Anyway, he was a blithe being in a troublesome world and it was a comfort just to see him.

Dan was saying, "Then he drew his trusty blade—" a dramatic pause.

"*Rusty?* Howcome he let it git rusty?" cried Shoestring.

"*Trusty,*" said Peter. "Hush, Shoestring."

"H'm. Dat nigger *cayn't* shut up. Ain't never got nothin' to say and always sayin' it," scoffed Beetee.

Shoestring glared and grunted.

"Oh, please be still!" Peter urged. "Then, what?" to Daniel.

"And cut off those seven heads, one by one, and they fell plunk-ker-plunk in the ocean."

"Golly!"

"And the water turned red with the blood; and Lance of Thule, well satisfied, went home for *that* day's bread and butter."

"Is that all? Oh, thank you; it was great! 'Lo, Sis!"

Berne waved to them, went to the porch where a cigar glowed in the shadow. "It's all right, Commodore," she said. "And Landry's all right, too."

"Yes, dear. Your mother spoke to me by 'phone. So grateful! And I've good news, too."

"Tell me. I can use it."

"Mr. Guidry came here shortly after you left. He was most considerate about the—recent fiasco. He offered to buy back from us the land we had purchased from them—under a—misconception. Of course I would not let him do so. It was a purchase. And I know that Guidry, that nobody, has much ready cash in these times. Naturally I would not consent. But it was kind."

"Yes, indeed. The good news, dear?"

"Just a moment. I couldn't have sold Pool o' the Moon anyhow. Because I'd loaned it to Ned."

"*Loaned* it to Mr. Ned! Why on earth—"

"I don't know. Some purpose of his. Young Bardé keeps busy there. Perhaps they think—"

"Father! You're not believing in that treasure *again!*"

"We-ll, no. No. Of course not. You're right. I suppose I'm slightly lunatic about the

place and can't keep from expecting some good from those moonlit waters." He smiled, sighed, thought of *Ombre's* letter.

"But the *good* news?"

"Odrasse came, then, and begged me to let his father buy their old part of the Cypress Swamp, at least. He was sincere, I saw. I know he shares your sentiment for the birds. He said he wanted to regain his part ownership in the heronry. So I sold that much back to him. Just the cypress strip alone. A very small sum in proportion to our—losses. But still! And, daughter, what do you suppose I did right away? I sent to Michigan an advance payment on a good modern pump. Too late for this year; but we'll be sure of a good pump next year, daughterling!"

He beamed, anticipating her joy and Berne rejoiced, to order, for him. Dear Commodore, how like him to send for the new pump before they were sure of having any plantation next spring,—with a drought threatened and those debts coming due!

Nothing to do but wait.

But she must see if Dan could tell her what use Mr. Ned, what use anybody could have for Pool o' the Moon. What could they be doing there? She was sure they would not foster false hopes in the Commodore. But what actual use—

Dan came to meet her in the shell-lily walk, and they turned by winding paths, silently, down to the bayou's edge.

Daniel was going away; she had kept telling herself that every day to harden her heart for the blow when it must fall; she wondered if she were ready for it now.

The fireflies, rhythmically soaring and flashing, the burning punk-sticks that Dan and Berne bore against mosquitoes, the brilliant early stars in the twilight, the purple hyacinths and yellow lilies floating on the water and the maroon flood of Bayou Vermilion, silver-plated with dying light, made the evening seem like a continuation of Dan's fairy-tale.

He put a pair of glowing punk-sticks in her hair.

"Don't be afraid; I'll watch them. But how could they set fire to fire? I've come for a serious confab, Flame."

She knew it, she told him; reported her visit to his grandfather.

"Can't for the life of me understand why my mother should ask my grandfather to urge me to visit her. They're not cordial correspondents, you know. I'm the bright little rainbow between them. She must have known I'd go as far as I could to do what she wanted. Always do. The little girl has something back in that funny thing she calls her mind."

"What did Mr. Ned say?"

"Just what you'd expect. Said the work could wait a bit if I were coming back here, and that he'd manage to finish it himself if I did not. I couldn't help laughing at *that*,—bless his heart!

Said I'd feel better afterwards, when I was at my work away from her, if I catered to the little lady in this. *He* assumes that I want to keep on plugging,—wonder whether *everybody's* so sure I won't glide back into the old environment. Silence reigns. Whose cue *was* that, I wonder?"

"I'm sure, Dan."

"Ah! Thanks. You're right, too. Flame dear, I ain't a loafer, never was. Listen. Hard for a fellow to say some things! Maybe it's coming down here where my roots are; Grandfather thinks that helps. I've found myself. You—and that—and Mr. Ned, too. Why, there's a man,—at first I said this to myself every day,—been all over the earth, adventured to the frozen North, explored in the tropics,—universities,—cities—and why does he choose *this*? Why does he come back to what he was born to, away from all the interesting people, things,—to a lot of birds and a farm? I said it at first. Then, pretty soon, I saw this farm full of all he'd learned everywhere. Better and bigger—all the new experiments—the beauty. I saw what it meant to preserve things—birds and—why, one day I saw deer come out of his forest and lean against him! He was getting the best even out of them!

"He was making the earth bear its best, finding it things to do it had never found for itself. He was getting the best salt out of its ribs. Making the best condiments in that funny rose-covered fac-

tory; sending them, selling them all over the world, giving strange folk the—flesh of Louisiana. And making happy, useful men and women all about him here; workers kept in their own tradition, not just *laborers*. Getting the best out of them, too. And, honey, then I saw the biggest wonder of all, to me.”

“Yes, Da?”

“Those interesting people and things he left for this,—they all come here to him. Some for the salt mines, some for the birds, some to paint the beauty, agriculturists, writers,—every kind.

“Working where you stand, getting the best out of the ground—says I to meself, says I,—that’s *it*. That’s loving your native land. That’s more my country-’tis-of-thee, Berenicia, than I ever got in France. Do you ‘get’ me, honey? Or am I just talking words?”

“Making the nests safe for everything—”

“Yes. That’s part of it. And I want my part. I’ll never feel that digging out the metal or salt or what-not is just a *job* again. Honest. Or that it lets me out of doing what I know because a lot of others can do it. I’m on to myself—thank God! You’ll see. You who think I’m a gay troubadour, troubadour, with my light dancing ‘kicks’ on the floor, on the floor!” he sang.

“You’re absurd!” she said, with eyes soft and bright.

She was glad. Dan’s fondness for her might be, —*was*,—just a summer’s flash of birds across his

sky, maybe the awakened love for the old land of his ancestors was just the transient song a-wing of an inherited memory; but they had made him want a nest and a permanent melody for his life to sing. She was glad,—no matter who came to share both nest and song!

As for her, she had a singing memory, too. Let it suffice.

This brought her thought back to her own problems.

“What are you doing, now that the survey’s over? I may know?” she began.

“No’m. It’s a secret. Ladies must wait. But I’ll tell you, confidentially, *where* my job is. Guess.

“Why, Father told me. But it’s scarcely credible!”

“Yes, ma’am. Pool o’ the Moon.”

“Why?”

“Mr. Ned borrowed it for some experiments.”

“Nonsense! He has land just like it. What experiment in *there*?”

“Am *I* telling this? Don’t you ever believe *anything*? Mr. Ned borrowed it. For purposes of his own. And no visitors allowed near it. *Nobody*. And I’m in charge of the experiment—or whatever it is.”

“Da, I know whatever he does is kind and good, even if I can’t understand it. And if he wants to have the place let alone, of course, we will keep

away. And I know neither of you would raise any hopes again in the Commodore—about treasure, for instance. Or anything chimerical.” Her voice had grown plaintive, troubled. “Da, please be careful of that. With the anxiety about the drought, and the strain he’s just been through! Oh, do be careful, Da!”

“Of course, we will.”

Dan had steeled himself against his heart; but the sight of Flame’s tired, anxious face weakened the defense. He gripped himself hard.

“Are you coming back here before you go to Colorado?” she asked him, keeping her clear voice steady.

“Yes. Of course.”

A wave of color swept over her face and into her eyes.

Seeing this, suddenly Dan knew that he was not going to Colorado. Suddenly he heard again the General saying that he, Dan, was a Bardé, the inheritor of a fighting tradition, of men who got what they wanted.

Gai-Da laughed.

Berne turned to him inquiringly.

“Be here when I come back, honey? Ain’t nobody gwine get you while I’m gone?”

She smiled. “Why did you laugh?”

“Did you see Martin Pinckney in town?”

“But that isn’t answering.”

“Answer me first, please. Did you?”

"Yes. And O Da, I can't tell you the wonderful thing he did for us!"

"He's a big man, Flame. Did you ever hear the story of David and Goliath?"

"Of course!"

"That's why I laughed, Berenicia, my child. Never mind. It's a riddle. What shall I bring you from the North?"

"Rain, please!"

"I will. Now for the worst of it. I must go to *Grandpère*."

A parting under the golden new stars, the glowing gold-tipped incense-sticks, the fireflies rising and falling like flakes of golden snow, the sweet evening heady with fragrance and Berne's golden eyes so near!

But, "No!" said Dan to himself. "I'm through taking things before I've earned them!" and tore himself away from her abruptly; rode back to *Grandpère*.

He went out into the country, did not pause until he had come to an old plantation-house, rather shabby now, but handsome enough in the starlight. He looked long at it, at the two tall magnolias holding up their white chalices of incense on each side of it, as if it were a shrine. He looked at the broad fields around it.

"*Place Bardé!*" said Dan to himself, and, as he watched the lamps being lighted, by strangers, in the ancient hall, "*Chez nous!*" he added. "Home!"

He rode thoughtfully back to Curéville and tied his horse at the hitching-post before Judge Le Boeuf's pretty garden.

There was a new manliness, a precision, in the dashing Bardé tread, that made Judge Julien say to his ladies, as he heard it on the walk, "I could swear that was Odillon fifty years ago!"

Odillon's grandson came to him in his study, his "office."

Dan looked about this little room before he spoke; the walls hung with commissions, testimonials, memorial praises, diplomas and portraits of many ancestors, their guns in several wars, their swords, their decorations; the shelves lined with books selected by them—and every selection, like the last made by Judge Julien himself, the best of its period. It all meant something to Daniel tonight, gave a reason for the fine dignity, the probity and quiet strength of the handsome head before him.

"Can you give me a *long* talk?" Daniel asked, and after a pause, he added timidly, causing the other a flash of pleasure, "*Oncle Jubat?*"

After the long talk, a very serious young man left Judge Julien Le Boeuf's house.

He stood at the brown picket-gate, his hand upon it, looked back at *madame's* lovely old-fashioned garden-beds lying in the moonlight like the photograph of a tapestry, at the comfortable, dignified

home among its vines and trees; he gazed down the white-dust streets, gleaming under the leafy, flecky shadows of branches, like cloth-of-silver under a veil of black Chantilly lace; he turned his eyes to the great-armed oaks that arched it; to the still houses glowing gently in trees and shrubbery like Chinese lanterns at some giant fête. All so good,—and so quiet! A distant bark of a dog, the stamp of a sleepy foot in a stall, the chime of a faint old clock. Fireflies rising gently. Families gently resting.

Every night the same.

Dan thought of Nice and Lake Geneva, of Paris, of New York and London in their seasons, of the Berkshires, of Coronado Beach; of opera all over the world, of skiing in the Alps.

He looked again up and down the silver street of Curéville asleep; breathed deep. The air was sweet with jasmine and roses. Above him suddenly a mocking-bird sang.

Gai-Da looked up at him. "All right!" he said. "Go tell your little red-headed friend, if you want to. Think you've caught me; do you? Not any. I know what's the truth of it as well as you do; better even than she does! Nests, eh? Watch *me, camarade!* You shall see what you shall see." Laughing, he squared his shoulders and went to his *Grandpère's*.

The next day Daniel left for the North.

And Berne waited, rejoicing in every little shower.

They dared not pump now, even had the pump been good, for the proportion of salt increased in the bayou. Berne waited, praying against the long, early drought that was threatening the rice-fields beside Vermilion waters.

CHAPTER XXIII

RICE

BERNE'S eaves and trees and bird-houses were bright with wings. The purple martins had peopled their nesting-boxes; the bayou thickets were gay with the variegated painted buntings; showy red-birds flashed like witchfire through the open spaces; yellow-throats were thick in the wild tangle of unclipped spirea hedge; and the high rose-vines, climbing on old trees, housed mocking-birds. She had tempted a pair of Carolina wrens into a tiny chalet built for them under the coping of Singsie's low cottage where their loud, jingling song told happiness. Ruby-throated humming-birds jeweled the trumpet-vine, diving headlong into its brilliant bugles.

Elodi, languidly lying in the hammock, took pleasure in the birds; in spite of herself, for Elodi was enjoying misery just now. Ah, that delicious self-pity of romantic adolescence!

She had had so much fun in New Orleans, had been such a success there, that she had not been able to attend her aching heart. Even when she saw Landry bestowing upon Helen Jeffrey the half-

teasing gallantry she had thought personal to herself, Elodi had been too busy with her own triumphs to suffer more than an occasional pang.

But now that she was home again, she indulged herself. Her pride badly stung,—and perhaps this was salutary,—she thought her heart was broken. Accustomed to dramatizing herself as the courted heroine of a novel, now she changed her rôle. She was *Elaine, Amy Robsart*, pining beautifully.

Her mother was anxious about her. But her *Tante* Amitilde Boutin winked a merry eye; and, meeting Odrasse on the street of Curéville, she said to him, “You will assist to the ball Saturday night; eh, Odrasse? Why no? You don’t care for the ball now? Oh, hé! I have noticed you have the air melancholy; not so? Why all the young people should be sad? Our Elodi, she is also depressed. This is strange! I tell you, Odrasse, I worry, me, about that Elodi. She is now at *Imaginaire* for two-three days. We thought a little change— Maybe you pass to *Imaginaire*?”

“Why, no, *Madame*. I—” Odrasse had his young misery, too; was not seeing Berne unnecessarily since he had renounced his hope of her.

“Oh! If you *can*,—for me, you do this, please! See how is Elodi. Berenicia is away on the plantation for all day today; she will have lunch *chez* Noalie. Elodi is alone—”

“All right, *Mme. Boutin*. I’ll be glad to.”

"*Bien!* She is so sad, that poor little girl!" She sighed for Odrasse's benefit; the sigh had a smile inside it.

Odrasse stopped at the general store for candy for Elodi; he *would* try to cheer her up. At least he could be useful to others, no matter how he suffered.

He bought a tie and a collar and went into the barber shop; Elodi liked to see him looking well. He did not want her to feel bad because he was a "rube." It was a blue tie and set off his blue eyes finely; he could not help noticing that, despite his sorrow.

Elodi was still in the hammock, sitting up in it now, listlessly embroidering an altar-cloth for her *alma mater*, the Convent of Mount Carmel, when Vitesse stopped at the gate.

She was glad to see Odrasse, she said wanly. Old friends were soothing. She made room for him in the hammock.

She told him, after awhile, that she understood his trouble, her own had given her keen eyes. Soon they grew confidential, rather rivals in confidences, indeed, as if each preferred to talk than to listen.

It made Odrasse uncomfortable to hear about her undying fealty to the unworthy Landry; and Elodi loved Berne, but nevertheless she hurried Odrasse over his ravings about her.

"Old friends are best," Elodi said. "They are who understand. I believe, me, in simple people.

They are the best. You help me bear it, Toto."

She gave him her hand; he held it, nodded. It was a very soft hand and agreeable to hold. He forgot to let go of it.

"You do me, too, Dodi. It's to be our secret. We'll help each other; nobody else shall know."

"Oh! People would never understand,—*jamais!* They would not believe in our so hopeless—you know, for *them*. And they would never understand how unsentimental our friendship for each other."

"Never." He pressed the hand.

"Sometimes you will want a girl friend; eh, Toto? Of course, I am not as pretty as Berne,—"

"Oh, you— Well, different. That's all. Different. But I'm not as stylish—"

"I don't like stylish—I mean, you are stylish enough, Toto. That is lovely, that cravat blue. It harmonizes thy eyes, Toto."

He blushed. "I got it to please you, Dodi."

"*Me?*"

"Yes. Let's please each other, since—"

They sighed.

Odrasse had meant to hurry away to be sure of escaping Berne, but he forgot to hurry.

The little Carolina wren put his head out of his chalet window and tinkled chattily; he is a good neighbor and an expert on nest-building, the Carolina wren.

Meanwhile, Berne and old Hope, crossing the fields, met Mme. Veriot. She wept to Berne pitifully,—no make-believe now,—over Borel's taking off, spoke of him as if Berne had never known that handsome young reprobate. "He was so *good*! Placed all his wages in my dress; such a good boy! When I would say, '*Venez, Borel*,' he would come, wherever he was. So good and diligent! Oh! The Blessed Mother have pity on me!"

Poor old lady! She was making herself believe in his virtues. Berne tried to comfort her; accepted that tradition. Hope shook his head sorrowfully after her, "'Monkey thinks his young's a beauty,'—dat's what de old folks' proverb say'."

Mme. Veriot turned back. "Much rain will come!" she called in a deep tone.

"Bress de Lawd!" Hope beamed. "She say' rain's a-comin'. Hallelujah! She a Hoodoo doctor! She *knows*."

Berne smiled. "She didn't see her own misfortune coming," she suggested.

"How does we-all know she didn't, Missy? Mebbe was somethin' a-tremblin' inside her an' tellin' her *all* de time. Mebbe she *wouldn't* see it. Um-um-m! Us cayn't tell what she felt inside her. 'Nobody but de shoe knows dar's a hole in de stockin'!' Dat's what de old folks say. Done been some teeny-weeny showers. Rice good enough,—so fur. Cayn't holdt out much longer,

dough. Pray de Good Lawd dat de devil done gave dat witch a true ravalation! So long, Missy! I got to keep a-steppin'."

Berne sat on the log fence beside which he had left her and surveyed the rice-field. Still doing fairly well,—only fairly now.

Thank Heaven there had been water enough to drown out the grass when it was young! Thank Heaven and Mr. Jonas, that perfect neighbor, who had helped drown out the grass in its lusty season when grass grows faster than rice!

But now, if this drought, this breathless drought, continued!

Vermilion was turning greenish, was easily lashed into foam, a sign of the deadly salt in the stream. Unless rain should come soon, soon, those fields, now scarcely covered, would go damp, then dry,—then dry! The dead dry stalks that never would ripen.

That big, broad planting; those many potential sacks of rice! If they should be lost, with them Imaginaire would go.

Good God, let it rain! Real, long, steady, life-giving rain. Let it come in time. Right rain.

Right rain. Her memory filled with horrible pictures. That August day, years ago, after just such dry weather, when the quick Southwester had come, forcing the Gulf into the bayou, the bayou over the dikes,—when a small tidal wave came in and killed the standing grain. She remembered

the salt stench as the water receded, the sickening—

“Stop!” she cried aloud to herself. There was time still for a bumper crop; good rains now would save.

“Ile Imaginaire! Sky and sun over you,—bayou beside you,—clouds and soil! Ile Imaginaire!” Berne thought aloud, indulging a fervent fancy. “I believe in *you*. In *your* Flame,—the Something Within that you symbolize,—that makes you. I have done all I can. Save Yourself, you Flame, you Something that *lives* this land! It’s up to you.”

That was Berne’s prayer. She felt strengthened by it.

When she reached the house in the late afternoon, Singsie called out to her, “Please’m, Missy, can you come here and set a speck, befo’ you goes to Miss Elodi? I wants to tell you somethin’, please’m.”

Smiling apology at Elodi, who was gathering, for the vase bouquets, the little waxy rose-jasmines called grand-dukes, Berne went into the kitchen.

Singsie was giggling, embarrassed. “Miss Berne, honey, does you expect you could add on another room to ma cabin, with dem old planks down behind de stable, if’n I furnishes you a man to build it free fo’ nothin’? ’Twouldn’t cost you mo’n some nails and a li’l paint, Miss Berne.”

“Another room? What for, Singsie?”

"Fo' ma Maw. I just couldn't stay on de place without ma Maw. Me and her's been friends sence I was born."

"But your mother lives with you, has a room with you, *now*. I don't understand."

"Well'm,—you see, Missy," giggling again. "Tell you de truth,—I been and gone and got married."

"Married!"

"Yas'm. Yistiddy. Down Lafayette; ma day off. I dunno howcome I come to come to did it. But I done did. So us needs a room fo' Maw."

"Surely you may have one. I wish you happiness, Singsie dear. Jury?"

"Lawsy, no! Dat Jury? No, *ma'am*. I's too tried and wore out o' dat Reverend Jury already, just listenin' him preach Sundays, let alone bindin' mase'f to him. I got me a *new* man,—a bran-new man. A Freginny nigger. Light yaller and laughy. Um-m! Dunno howcome I come to did it."

"Where is he?"

"On de railroad. Gone to Noo 'leans. Always did want a steamboat man or a railroad porter, 'cause dey got to be away f'um home mo'n half de time. Men's powerful wearyin' when you gets 'em stiddy. Um-m. Ain't never gwine leave you, Missy; you knows dat. Mens is good enough fo' *lovin'*,—but when it comes to *livin'*, gimme a good kitchen and a kind missy, and I is *placed*."

"When did you meet him, Singsie?"

"Never seen dat nigger till yistiddy in Lafayette. Seen him in de mornin'. Married him in de night. Just sort o' come over me to do it. Dat's de way it *do*, Miss Berne. 'Thanky, Missy!'" and the bride went off to bid Hope save that lumber against her liege lord's "time off."

It made Berne smile at herself to find that Sing-sie's romance caused her to think of Dan.

She had missed him sorely, in spite of the work and worry. Everybody missed him; wherever she went people stopped her to ask if she knew when Dan Bardé was coming back, to hope it would be soon.

She was beginning to see Dan in a new light, through their eyes. "He *give*' himself so to every one, to everything that comes," said Noalie. "Never of my life have I seen a young man so earnest."

"Earnest, Noalie?"

"Oh, but yes! Whatever he does, to whomever he speaks, with whatever he amuse himself, he is so *in* it, you understand. He is *there* with you, all of him, until it is done. Like a little child."

That was true. Like a child, sincere and absorbed. He played so thoroughly, became wrapped in his game, meant it so, because he was earnest; not because he was superficial. He would work the same way; she was beginning to feel sure.

If he had—cared for her *really*, he would have done that in the same way, too; without surrender

to circumstance. Well, let be! Berne set her lips and that chin,—the flesh upon it now a little thinner than in the spring, its firm line more salient.

Dan was in the parish, had returned the day previous, back to his job. Berne, for all her resolution, was woman enough to have felt a pang at first because he had merely telephoned, had not come straight to her. But she blamed herself for it; he had said that Mr. Ned needed him. Berne understood the imperiousness of work; was proud of this newly revealed Daniel who obeyed his job.

Thinking of this and of Singsie's short and expeditious romance, she joined her guest among the grand-dukes.

Elodi was her smiling rose-and-ivory, pansy-eyed self again; she declared herself, oh, so much better! She had changed her plan, she said. She was going to the ball after all. Toto had asked her. But all her frocks were so mussed from the New Orleans visit, she must make repairs. Might she not go home that night when Mr. La Grande drove into Curéville for his chess game?

Berne was glad that her father would have Elodi's chatter to enliven the drive. He was worrying. She dreaded the haunted look with which he questioned her, "The rice?" every time she came in from the fields. She knew how fear was clutching at him, how he loved this ancestral home, how his pride would agonize to lose it. Poor Commodore!

She stood at the gate where she had waved good-

by to her father and Elodi, stood long after they had turned the bend.

Peter came to be kissed before running off to bed.

"Sis," he said. "Will you hear me my French verbs tomorrow? We had to promise to study them some in vacation. Gee! I hate parts of speech! I like languages all fixed together,—how to *say* things; but not to read words all kind of assorted, say 'em over and over one by one." He laughed. "But I know more French than most of the chaps; 'count of living here, of course."

"What do you like to read best, Pete? Honest!"

"Pirates and Luther Burbank. Gee! He's a wiz! Mr. Ned gave me a book about him."

Luther Burbank! Oh, she knew it; she knew Mater was wrong; this was deeper than a boyish fancy. Peter was a born planter—and must have his plantation.

The rice *must* come, the rich heads of full oblong grains! She called to them to fulfil themselves.

Then she went indoors, curled up on the cushions in her favorite window-seat to read. And, like other tired farmers over a book at night, soon drowsed; her head fell back on the cushions. She was fast asleep.

She did not know how long she slept, but it must have been a long time.

A change in the air of the room aroused her.

A little flurry of leaves blew in through the open door.

There was no sound of evening birds.

But there was a sound! The perfect melody. The symphony of joy. Thank God! Oh, thank God! The steady, heavy, tropical downpour of blessedness, the long, sincere, hearty music of an enduring rain!

Salvation had come while she slept.

Berne ran out into the wall of rain, held up her arms to it, her face already wet with grateful tears.

"Why, Flame!"

It was Dan at the gate, in dripping oilskins.

"Go inside this instant!" he commanded. "It's pouring."

"It's pouring!" Berne echoed ecstatically. "Thank God!"

She went back under the protection of the "gallery."

"I'll take the horse around to the stable," Dan said. "Then,—O Flame! I've such *news!*"

She went indoors to wait for him.

Her heart was singing with the rain.

CHAPTER XXIV

TREASURE TROVE

DAN left his oilskins outdoors, came into the living-room to her; his eyes were shining. He did not take her hand, just said, "Here's me, sweetie."

"Let's sit out there on the bench, Da. I want to be near that rain! Oh, isn't it glorious?"

"Put that scarf over your shoulders, then. And hurry. You're wasting time. And I've got *something* to talk about."

As he helped her wind Mater's fleecy-sheer white shawl about her, his hands trembled.

They sat on the old settee-bench, on the brick floor behind the wistarias; the warm light from within the room illumined Berne's hair and the happiness in her eyes.

"I said so!" Dan commented aloud, regarding her. "I said all the time, 'No use trying to compare them with her; they haven't *anything*. When you think about Flame, those poor women just naturally cease to exist.'"

"Is that the great news that couldn't wait?"

"No; that's no news at all. But I *have* great

news. Flame," seriously with increasing eagerness as he spoke. "You know that Hoodoo Pool o' the Moon? Know why it is Hoodoo? Why nothing lives in it? Child, it's *salt*. A salt spring. I found it out that night, when I washed my hands after Borel— Well, there was something queer to me about the soil in that trench where they were digging. You see, I'd been reading up about salt, studying the country, talking to Mr. Ned. He'd told me how they found the big deposit at Petite Anse,—about the difference in the formation where there was *plenty*, and all that,—and that place looked interesting to me.

"I got Caleb to stay with me when you had all gone away, and dig. And the deeper we went the better it looked.

"I told Mr. Ned and he looked and brought experts. Flame, dear,—I don't want to raise hopes too high; nobody can *know* positively about anything down in the earth, under the ground, until he goes in deep and looks around,—but it seems to the State experts and to a man I brought back with me who knows as much about salt as is known,—it seems to them that in those high mounds back of the magnolias,—there is, on Ile Imaginaire property, a salt supply,—O Berenicia, *mia!*—like the one at Petite Anse. And that's inexhaustible and ninety-nine per cent pure,—the best rock salt on earth!

"No! Don't talk yet. Listen. Shine on me

that way, but just listen! Mr. Ned's going to meet your father and Mr. Guidry in Curéville. Reckon there won't be any chess-game this night! Going to make a proposition to them about operating this mine,—if it turns out as we think,—operate with his own, take Mr. La Grande and Mr. Guidry into his company. If your father will. And I bet he will!"

"Oh! Da!"

"It's at least a reasonable hope, Flame."

Ah, that was what dear Commodore needed, she thought,—a reasonable hope!

"Father felt that Pool o' the Moon held treasure. And *you* found it for us, *Gai-Da!*"

"You're not half as glad about that as I am, old girl. It was blessed luck."

"*Luck?* Ability, Da."

"Not so much of that. But, honestly, it does come, that sort of thing," he looked at her a little self-consciously. "From a fellow's keeping his mind on his job. If it pans out, honey, they're going to put old Dan in charge; under Mr. Ned's eye, of course. Going to let me *make* a mine! Hallelujah!"

"You will stay here, then? It is better to stay, you think? Than to go to Colorado?" Her steady voice gave no hint of how she wanted her "wings" to stay.

"Yes. I want to. Of course, there was a doubt, a question. At first, until we know, I can't expect

this new company to pay as well as they would out there. And I'm needing money. But I'll stay; you bet I will!"

To pay as well? Dan needing money? Berne was astonished at that as a consideration; Daniel had money enough as it was, even without work. Of course, she would not pursue the question in her mind, though he gave her a side-glance, waiting, hoping she would pursue it.

"Your mother was willing, Da?"

Daniel laughed indulgently. "That worked out finely. The little rascal! You remember my telling you about the young Englishman I used to hate so in my childhood, because I was afraid he'd marry my mother? And how she often reminded me of it, later? She says now that she couldn't very well have married him then; or maybe my jealousy saved her from a hasty step." He chuckled. "He was only a poor cadet with debts piled up to the zenith and had to go live off in Canada in some vast wilderness, which would have annihilated Mother.

"But *now*! He's inherited a title and wealth untold and everything glossy. He's a widower; and he remembered Mother,—any man would; she certainly is a little winner; wait until you see her!—and he would a-wooing go. Turned up this summer. Mother was afraid I'd still be jealous. She was glad,—the little scamp!—when I said I was 'fixin' to quit her.

"I never suspected a thing. Men are blind, I

suppose. For Mme. Boutin said *she* thought there was something, as soon as she heard Mother's letter to *Grandpère*.

"She wrote to *Grandpère*, opening communications, wanted to arrange—some—some business with him. She always has a reason behind her baby eyes. I'm going to miss her."

Berne liked Dan's tenderness for his mother, was beginning to see that charmingly designing little lady in the light of his affection.

"So you'll have to put up with me hanging around, Miss La Grande. Flame!"

"Yes, Da?"

"Why don't you ask me what you wanted to know a minute ago,—why I need money now? Why I'm 'most broke? I'm pining to reveal it."

"Do, then,—please."

He took both her hands, rose, drew her upright, too, held her hands upon his breast. His voice trembled under the pride in it.

"Flame, dear, I've pledged my income,—and all that belonged to her in *Grandpère's* trusteeship, which my mother has now turned over to me, I've spent that too. And I've borrowed from her and from *Grandpère*. And I ain't got nothing left but *me*."

"Why, Daniel!"

"Oh! Berne,—Flame,—Darling! I've gone and bought me a nest. The *Place Bardé*! Now, don't *you* cry." There were tears in his own eyes,

too. "*Grandpère* is swimming in tears about it. And even Judge Julien, when I told him I meant to have a try for it, when I'd learned it was for sale. The old place said to me, 'Come home, Dan!' I *had* to have it. The people who lease it have until next spring to stay. By that time, maybe, the mine will *be*. And you shall teach me, and Odrasse, and all of you; especially Mr. Jonas; all about plantations. I'll be learning all about plantations; don't laugh! Oh! It's a great game, dear!"

"Daniel,—forgive me—my not recognizing,—not knowing,—" Berne began contritely.

"Ssh! 'Twas you set up this glorious being. Silly child! I deserved everything you said. It was right." He looked at her timidly. "Just now you said—*recognized*. Honey,—is it the little boy that *was*—you think you see, again?"

"I've been seeing him for a long time, *Gai-Da*."

"Flame! Flame of my heart, have *you* the heart to see me building a nest right under your eyes and not say, 'I'll come live in it, Da'! Flame, won't you try to love *me*, the man I am?"

"My wings!"

She slipped into his arms.

"My Flame! Oh, I'm kindled now, dear girl, forever!"

Berne looked up, the quiet barriers she had built up about her ardent heart all down, lifted her eyes to his.

Seeing what he saw in them, Dan bent his head.

He buried his lips in her hair still wet with the blessed rain.

"I want to be worth it! Oh, I want to be worth it!" Daniel said. He pressed the bright head against his heart.

"Flame dear, light o' me, I wish I could lift every care at a sweep. But there's work ahead, a hundred chances of disappointment, in mine, in crop. After one year's crop, *you* know,—another—another—to be saved. But each year is to be—"

"A twig for the nest," Berne said.

"No! Not *years*, honey! Can't wait years to get the nest built. Listen dear. If we can swing things,—if hard work and steady hope will do it, when those interlopers leave *our* house in the spring,—when the birds make their nests! Dear, my mother knew my trouble, knew what I needed, why I found myself *here*. She said it was because I had never had a home, and now I'd found the old one that my father had never ceased to yearn over. I needed a home. I came home, to myself,—to you. O dearest, won't you come home with *me*? Please, ma'am, marry me, red-top, in the spring?"

She let him have her lips.

After a blessed moment, "I've found the treasure *now*!" Dan said.

"You won't weary of the nest-building, the work, the grind, Da?"

"But we'll have flights, too, dear. We'll plan

for flights. When we're able. I'm going to fly with you singing,—show you the whole world. You need to fly away sometimes—for the joy of coming home. That's what makes wings so splendid; they're things to fly home with. And that's what I've enjoyed it all so far, the travel and the play,—I know now,—to be able to show it all to you, some day."

"A long day, dear. In the meantime, *Gai-Da*, I know the grind, the weariness, the work—"

"Oh, no! It's not to be all that. Never, never again. It's to be just a thing to *win*, dear love. The greatest game in the world!"

She understood him now. She knew he would play it to win because it was a game to him, and *Gai-Da* played his games.

He said, "It's all wonderful, sweetheart. As if, when you get *that light* going, it sort o' lights the world."

A long silence.

The wind and the rain swept steadily on.

"What is that sound, to you, Da?"

"What sound, sweetness? Oh! Sounds like wind and rain to me."

"But what *else*?"

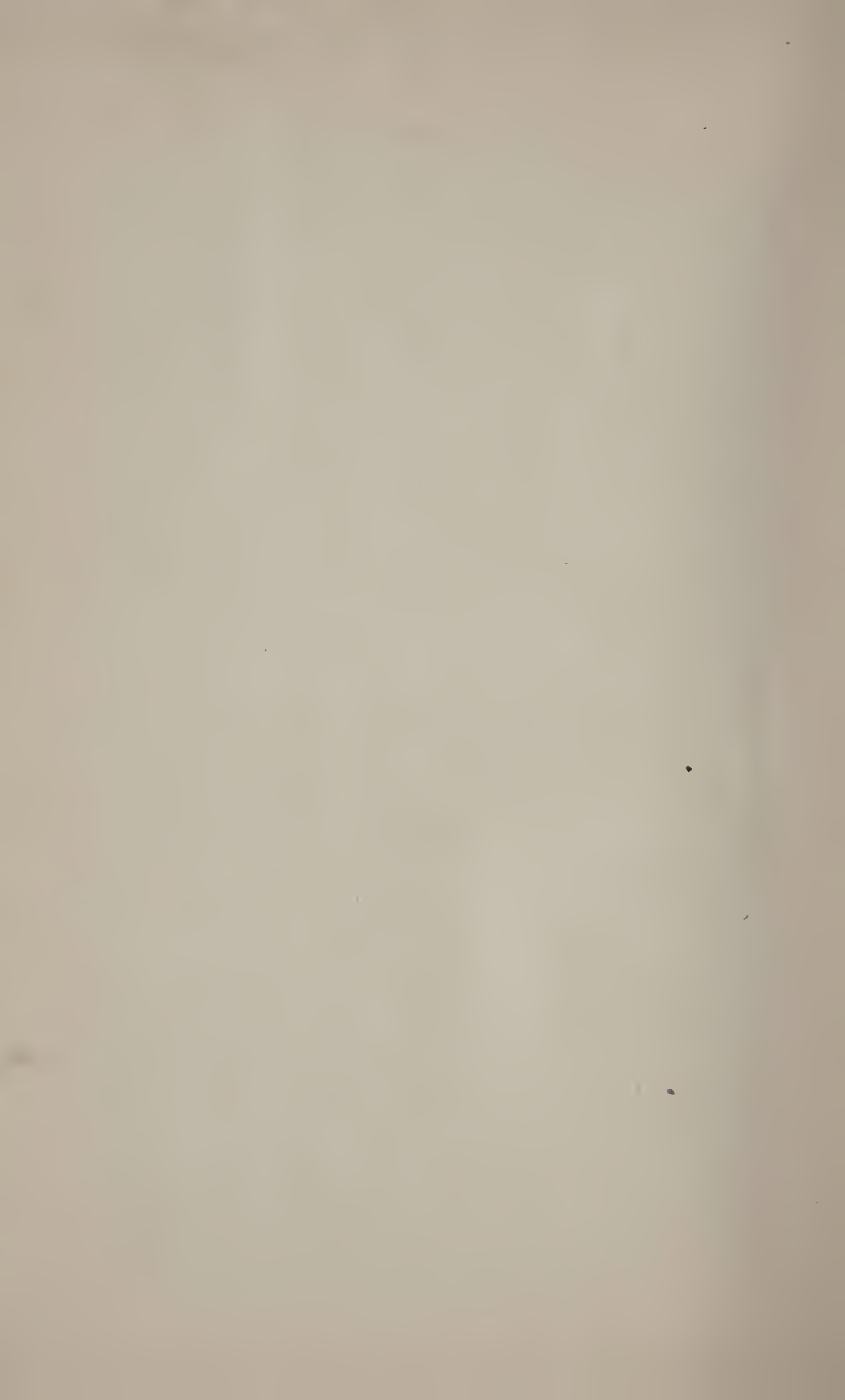
" 'It is not raining rain to me; it's raining dollar-bills,' " he misquoted. "That what you mean?"

She laughed. Then, "It sounds to me like great wings sweeping over the world, blessing all the nests here now, and nests to come. Bird's homes

and men's. All these homes,—Motherlie's and Noalie's and—"

"Ours, Flame o' my heart," he said. "And, please God, ours, my dear!"

THE END



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0002160852A

